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The University of Liverpool

US Protestant Natalist Reception  
of Old Testament “Fruitful Verses”:  
A Critique

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

John Patrick McKeown

July 2011

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## Abstract

### US Protestant Natalist Reception of Old Testament “Fruitful Verses”: A Critique

The advocacy of a high birth rate is an ideology called natalism. In the USA since 1985 some Protestants have used Old Testament verses to support natalist arguments. This thesis argues that natalism is inappropriate as a Christian application of Scripture, especially since rich nations’ populations’ total footprint is detrimental to biodiversity and to poor nations’ welfare. The methodology is analysis of natalist writings, investigation of possible historical roots, and then evaluation of natalist interpretation from three perspectives: the ancient Near Eastern OT context, patristic Christian tradition, and contemporary ecological concerns.

The analysis and historical investigation consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 considers wider natalism, modern secular and religious varieties, and the cultural context of US Evangelicalism. Through textual analysis of biblical reception in recent natalist writings, it identifies the verses cited and common interpretative arguments. Chapter 3 asks whether this natalism has roots in historic Protestantism. It investigates the claim made by some natalist advocates that Martin Luther in the 16th century expounded similar ideas about fecundity.

The evaluation consists of three chapters. Chapter 4 explores the ancient Near Eastern cultural context, and Old Testament ideas about fecundity’s role in God’s project of salvation. Ventures by biblical scholars into contemporary application of the verses in question are critiqued. Chapter 5 considers Augustine’s comments on human fruitfulness in the Bible and his thinking on fecundity. Using *ressourcement* from this representative of patristic tradition, Augustine’s reception is compared with natalism. Chapter 6 explains an ecological hermeneutic which brings biblical and classic Christian biblical reception into conversation with contemporary concerns. My reception of the verses uses a hermeneutic lens derived from Genesis 1, and gives priority to the contextual issues of biodiversity and the un/sustainability of the ecological footprints of overpopulated rich nations.

The thesis is the first to offer systematic analysis of natalist biblical reception, and focuses on the neglected majority of natalists which accepts family planning. It highlights exegetical arguments which are then compared with Luther’s writings, tested against plausible meanings of the fruitful verses, and tested against Augustine and patristic tradition. Previous research on ecologically responsible interpretation of these verses and on Christian thinking about human fecundity and overpopulation is updated and extended in this dissertation.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been completed without help from many people. Above all, my primary supervisor Professor David Clough gave detailed advice on every part and encouraged its completion. My secondary supervisor, Professor Celia Deane-Drummond guided me at key stages in the thesis development. My original supervisor, Dr Eric Christianson, as well as guiding the early stages of this project, also shaped my earlier work on the denigration of nonhuman creatures in reception. Dr John Bimson guided me as External Advisor and also, by recruiting me to teach at Trinity College Bristol about population, stimulated my thinking on that. Professor Tom Greggs kindly read the whole thesis. My proof-reader, Mrs Karen Vincent, helpfully identified many errors and infelicities.

Thanks are also due to others who helped with particular chapters. Dr Kathryn Blanchard read the Luther chapter, and Revd Dr Kristin Johnston Lagen, the editor of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, published a compact version of it. Professor Kate Cooper chaired the Ecclesiastical History Society postgraduate forum at which the Augustine chapter was presented, and pointed me toward the literature on ancient procreationism. Questions after annual presentations at the Chester departmental seminars since 2006 have been formative for this thesis.

The University of Chester provided the bursary which made this research possible. Thanks also to Revd Peter Francis, Warden of Saint Deiniol's Library for awarding me the Richard L. Hills Scholarship. My working base at the University of Gloucestershire helped greatly, with thanks to Maggie Wheel of InterLibrary Loans, and Rachel Reid, the Humanities librarian. Thanks also to staff at university libraries in Cheltenham, Chester, Birmingham, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh, and also at the Queen's Foundation (with thanks to Michael Gale), and Tyndale House, who all gave valuable assistance. Jon Ashwell, developer of bibliographic software *Bookends* frequently provided timely advice especially when, at a late stage, I converted two chapters from Footnotes style, and four chapters from the in-text author:date version of MHRA format, turning them all to the MLA style.

Finally, thanks to my wife Lynda for her support, and our children Calum and Kirsten for their patience during this project.

## Abbreviations

<i>adv. Jov.</i>	<i>adversus Jovinianum</i> , by Jerome
aNE	ancient Near East [or ancient Near Eastern]
AE	<i>Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia</i> . ed. Allan Fitzgerald, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . ed. James B. Pritchard. 3rd edn. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . ed. Alexander Roberts et al. New York: Scribner.
COS	<i>Context of Scripture</i> . ed. William W. Hallo. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
<i>Dem. Evang.</i>	<i>Demonstratio Evangelica</i> , by Eusebius of Caesarea
<i>ESV</i>	<i>English Standard Version</i>
GFN	Global Footprint Network
GSS	General Social Survey (USA)
<i>hab. virg.</i>	<i>De habitu virginum</i> , by Cyprian of Carthage
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LCMS	Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
LS	<i>Luther on Women: A Sourcebook</i> . eds. Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> . ed. Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955. Logos edition 2007.
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NLT	<i>New Living Translation</i>

NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.</i> eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: Scribner.
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PCA	Presbyterian Church of America
RTSF	Religious and Theological Students' Fellowship
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
WSA	<i>The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century.</i> ed. John Rotelle. Hyde Park NY: New City Press.

#### **Abbreviations for works by Augustine**

<i>c. Adim.</i>	<i>Contra Adimantum Manichae disciplum</i>
<i>b. conjug.</i>	<i>De bono conjugali</i>
<i>b. vid.</i>	<i>De bono viduitatis</i>
<i>cat. rud.</i>	<i>De catechizandis rudibus</i>
<i>civ. Dei</i>	<i>De Civitate Dei</i>
<i>conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones</i>
<i>cont.</i>	<i>De continentia</i>
<i>div. qu.</i>	<i>De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus</i>
<i>doc. Chr.</i>	<i>doctrina Christiana</i>



<i>ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>en. Ps.</i>	<i>enarrationes in Psalmos</i>
<i>c. Faust.</i>	<i>Contra Faustum Manichaeum</i>
<i>Gn. litt.</i>	<i>De Genesi ad litteram</i>
<i>Gn. adv. Man.</i>	<i>De Genesi adversus Manichaeos</i>
<i>Gn. litt. imp.</i>	<i>De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber</i>
<i>gr. et pecc. or.</i>	<i>De gratia Christi et de peccato originali</i>
<i>haer.</i>	<i>De haeresibus</i>
<i>c. Jul.</i>	<i>Contra Julianum</i>
<i>mor.</i>	<i>De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum</i>
<i>nupt. et conc.</i>	<i>De nuptiis et concupiscentia</i>
<i>pecc. mer.</i>	<i>De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum</i>
<i>retr.</i>	<i>Retractiones (Reconsiderations)</i>
<i>c. Sec.</i>	<i>Contra Secundinum Manichaeum</i>
<i>serm.</i>	<i>Sermones</i>
<i>virg.</i>	<i>De sancta virginitate</i>

These are the standard abbreviations given in AE, except for *sermones* where AE uses the single letter *s.* but I have used *serm.* following the SBL style.

## Chapter 1. Biblical reception and method

“Because we’re Christians, we believe our commandment is to be fruitful and multiply ... big families are what God would have us to do.” (Strand)<sup>1</sup>

The research genre of this project is the study of popular, that is non-academic, reception of Scripture. This can yield cultural insights and also illuminate issues in hermeneutics and ethics. One approach is to focus on particular readers and their interpretation of a thematic set of biblical verses.<sup>2</sup> The genre encompasses historical and contemporary reception: examples include studies of 19th century exegetical preaching in defence of slavery (Harrill), and the use of Scripture by recent critics of environmentalism (Maier). The receptors who capture my attention are Protestants who advocate high birth rates, an ideology which I label natalism.<sup>3</sup> The biblical texts they cite most often are “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth” from Genesis 1, and the “quiver full” of sons from Psalm 127. They also cite many other Old Testament (hereafter OT) verses that portray human fruitfulness as a blessing, and I refer to these collectively as “fruitful” verses,<sup>4</sup> which I list in chapter 2.

The aim of this project is to analyze and evaluate natalist biblical interpretation and the arguments derived from it. In this chapter I will first define my terminology and concepts. I will argue that natalism is an important topic. I will delimit the scope of the project, and explain the criteria by which my primary sources are selected. I will consider previous research on those sources, and more broadly on contemporary

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1. The interviewee was Rod Dreher, assistant editor, *Dallas Morning News*.
  2. Another type of approach is to focus on one text and trace its diverse receptions across history and within different cultures. The text might be one verse as for example in Jeremy Cohen’s survey of the reception of Genesis 1:28, or selections from a book of the Bible as in the Blackwell Bible series (2007-). My project is not of this type.
  3. The synonym “pronatalism” often appears in literature in the fields of History and Sociology, for example in the title “Pronatalism, Reproduction and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938” (Lovett). However the implied reverse term “antinatalism” is rare. The simple term “natalism” has been used in Religious Studies, for example by Daniel Maguire in a section entitled “The Natalist Thrust of Religions” (313), and it is also used by a US journalist describing the phenomenon (Brooks). I will use this simpler term.
  4. David Yegerlehner referred to a similar selection of verses as “fruitfulness texts” (8).

application of the fruitful verses. I will present a theoretical basis and methodology for evaluating popular reception, and conclude by showing how this requires and shapes each of the subsequent chapters.

### **Definition and distinctions**

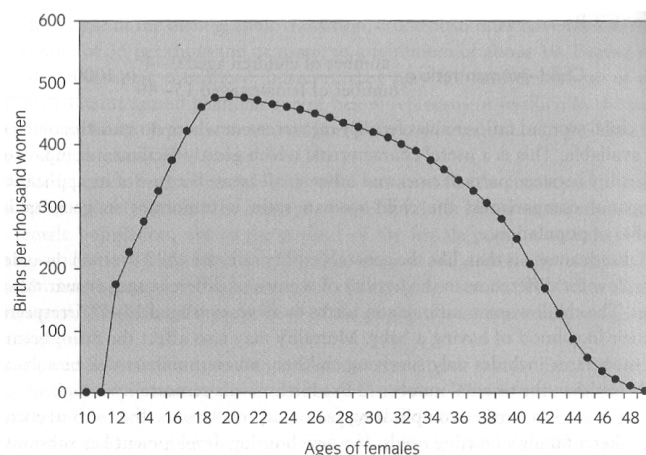
Natalism is the advocacy of a high birth rate within a community. Urging parents to have additional children is an obvious manifestation, but there are other parameters affecting the birth rate and efforts to influence these can also be natalist.<sup>5</sup> These proximate determinants of fertility concern womens' lives and are primarily the percentage who become mothers, the age at which childbearing starts, and the duration of any interruptions (child spacing). In traditional societies these are shaped by the proportion never marrying, the age at marriage,<sup>6</sup> the interval before widows remarry, physical infertility, and the fertility-suppressant effect of breastfeeding (postpartum infecundability) which was extended for two years or more in many cultures. How much other methods of family planning were used in pre-modern societies is debated. In the modern world contraception became (and remains) very significant. Other factors still contribute to limiting births, but late marriage is far less important than it once was because with a small ideal family size most women complete their family despite starting at a later age. However within US natalist subcultures, aspiring to a larger number of children, age again becomes important. The graph overleaf of births in (pre-modern) "natural fertility" populations shows why age at marriage, and spacing between successive children, are determinants of completed fertility among natalists. All the factors noted above can be regarded as levers potentially usable by natalists to influence birth rates.

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5. I will ignore determinants such as the age of menopause, maternal mortality, and disease, which either vary little across a modern national population, or are not amenable to change through natalist exhortation at the individual or sectarian level.

6. Phrases such as "age at marriage" continue to be standard terminology in demographic literature, though reproductive relationships other than marriage are included in the data under these euphemistic headings.

Frequency of births by age of mother (Baird 262)



A minor factor but one with rising significance, especially in the USA and Israel, is medical treatment of infertility. For example, Susan Kahn finds that a “convergence of pronatalist social pressure, rabbinic permission, and economic accessibility makes fertility treatment all but inevitable for infertile ultraorthodox women in Israel” (294). By contrast, I have not found advocacy of fertility treatment among Protestant natalists and some oppose it as unnatural.<sup>7</sup>

I make a distinction between effect and motive, and describe below seven ideas which in practice raise birth rates but are not necessarily natalist. Any of these ideas can be held independently or in combination with others. The ideas are, first, that marriage is normative, and most people should marry; second, that youthful marriage is the ideal; third, that seeking to reproduce is essential to the constitution of a valid marriage; fourth, that any conjugal act without intention to reproduce is perverted; and fifth, that sterilization is self-harm. The sixth and seventh ideas condemn the use of artificial contraceptives<sup>8</sup> and procedures leading to abortion. In practice these ideas may increase birth rates, for example by disparaging singleness, encouraging earlier marriage, stigmatizing the childless, and hindering family planning. However they should not be classified as natalist unless the writer’s motives include a desire

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7. An exception is vasectomy reversal, which Protestant natalists recommend.

8. Arguably this might not raise fertility even in effect as well-trained practitioners of Natural Family Planning can apparently prevent conception as effectively as users of artificial contraceptives (Zimmerman).

for high fecundity.<sup>9</sup> If the expressed concern is instead only about, for example, promiscuity, self-harm, fornication, selfishness, or killing the unborn, then the idea is not natalist, even if based on the same OT fruitful verses. The first and seventh ideas are common among conservative Protestants. A small minority of Protestants adhere to the fourth idea (procreationism) and so avoid family planning: most of these are also natalist,<sup>10</sup> and they can be called unlimited natalists.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between natalism and beliefs that incidentally affect birth rates will now be clarified. The fourth idea, that a conjugal act must intend reproduction, is called procreationism. Kathy Gaca (94, 255) finds its roots in Pythagorean eugenics, as transformed by Philo, adopted by Clement of Alexandria, and moderated by Augustine for whom fallen marital sexuality is a venial sin excused by the good of offspring. That is far from natalism (Augustine prefers abstinence to reproduction as chapter 5 will show), and Catholicism now permits Natural Family Planning (NFP) as implied by *Casti Connubii* in 1930 and clarified by Pius XII in 1951 (Zimmerman 8). *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 contrasts two couples who are both “attempting to ensure that a child will not be born,” that is both have contraceptive intention, but only the couple using a method of timed abstinence is deemed to be acting morally: this is compatible with planning a small family size. Conversely, most Protestant natalists accept routine use of artificial contraceptives for timing and spacing births while advocating a high birth rate and large family size.<sup>12</sup>

The condemnation of intentional childlessness is not necessarily natalist. Many modern Protestants believe the “unitive and procreative ends of marriage” must not be divided but argue this applies at the level of the whole duration of a marriage

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9. In demography “fertility” refers to the number of births and “fecundity” refers to a potential parent’s physical ability to reproduce, whereas in medicine the latter is referred to as fertility. I will use both terms as synonyms referring to the number of births.

10. The only instance I have found of procreationist Protestant writers who are not also natalist are Sam and Bethany Torode, and they are exceptional since they later disowned their procreationism as a false burden (and also converted to Greek Orthodoxy).

11. Many unlimited natalists identify themselves as “Quiverfull” (Joyce 134).

12. The use of contraceptives to increase the surviving number of children (in situations of subsistence poverty) is further indication that anti-contraception is not the same as natalism.

(Mangina 476). The implication that a deliberately childfree marriage is wrong is emphasized by Thielecke and others (Poulson 154). Where that is the only reason, urging such couples to have a child is not natalist, but the same exhortation if rooted in a desire for high birth rates would be natalist; and it could be a tactical step prior to urging higher reproductivity. The same is true for all seven of the ideas I noted as incidentally affecting birth rates. When they appear in writings that also advocate high fecundity, they function as part of a natalist agenda.

## **Project rationale**

Until the 1990s few biblical scholars or theologians were interested in popular reception of the Bible, but that has changed: for example John Sawyer (*Reception*) at a consultation for the Blackwell commentary series observes the many “ordinary people who read the biblical text” and finds “what they make of the text is often as interesting as what the scholars are saying” but has been neglected. One type of justification is that study of differing interpretations across times and places illuminates the range of possible interpretation. It also enables exploration of hermeneutic issues such as popular awareness of the distance between ancient and modern worlds and how this affects application. More radically, Fernando Segovia calls for “critical analysis of all readers and readings, whether located in the academy or not” and argues that popular reception is “as worthy of analysis and critique as the readings emerging from prominent scholars” (13). The Blackwell Bible Commentary series shows that for many texts and historical periods the study of reception can be profitable. However, given the huge range of “ordinary” interpreters and the extent of Scripture, the choice of material must be justified.

Impact or real-world effect of reception is the other type of justification for doing this type of research.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza urges that “scholarship must acknowledge the continuing political influence of the Bible” in a world where

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13. I will not employ Heikki Räisänen’s distinction between “effect” and “use” of the Bible. He counts the historical impact of a “plausible” exegesis as an “effect” whereas the impact of a “contrived” exegesis (his example is allegory) he counts as a “use” of Scripture (312). This distinction depends on his binary divide between plausible and contrived exegesis, but in my view there is a continuum from more to less plausible.

many people assert “the public claims and values of biblical texts” (16). Beneficial effects of Scripture’s reception warrant study, but so do harmful effects. There is an ethical responsibility for scholarship to analyze cultural uses of the Bible. Kenneth Newport, regarding Adventist reception of John’s Apocalypse after the disaster at Waco, finds the “eisegesis continues, and so, in all probability, does the danger of some further flare-up,” and so because of potential harmful effects the “scholarly community has a duty to understand this chemistry” (200). The impacts noted by researchers in this genre are not usually quantifiable, and proving causality from biblical reception to human behaviour is difficult if not impossible.

My reason for investigating this topic is the impact of natalism on ecological sustainability. Others may be interested in its effects at the levels of individual, family and church. For example, parents who become convinced that natalism is “biblical” but are unwilling to increase their reproductivity might suffer false guilt. Those unable to reproduce may be distressed. Parents who achieve high reproduction may have less time for outward-facing ministry and evangelism. In extreme cases there will be detriment to women’s education, and unsafe pregnancies. Similarly to a patriarchal ideology that falls into “the essentialist trap of defining women in terms of motherhood” (Muers, “Maternal” 312), natalism could be rebuked for its effect on women, even though it rightly esteems motherhood. However the effect of high fecundity on individuals is subjective, and I will not contradict natalist women’s testimony as to its spiritual and emotional benefits. My rationale is not at the level of individual and family, nor is it based on gender issues, but instead it considers the aggregate effect of natalism on US population size.

Those reflecting on natalism’s demographic effects usually focus on national make-up, on relative changes in the proportions belonging to different subcultures because this has political consequences. A study of the 20th century shift within US Protestantism from mainline to conservative dominance used GSS (General Social Survey) data to compare the contributions of causes of that shift (Hout, Greeley and Wilde). They found that “higher fertility and earlier childbearing among women from conservative denominations” was the primary cause, more important than the combined effect of conversion and changing allegiance (469). A group with fertility above the national average will (if offspring stay when adult) become a larger part of

the population. Phillip Longman<sup>14</sup> laments the low birth rate of liberal Americans and contrasts it with others “who believe they are ... commanded by a higher power to procreate” (*Empty Cradle* 5). “Tomorrow’s children ... will disproportionately be descended from ... patriarchal religion,” and he claims this “helps explain ... the gradual drift of American culture ... toward religious fundamentalism” (“Patriarchy” 59). Longman calls on liberals to raise their fecundity in response. Eric Kaufmann, though he also forecasts fundamentalist predominance, considers the prospect of “a population footrace between seculars and fundamentalists is a much greater threat” in the consequences it would have for sustainability (263).

The effect of additional births on the USA’s total population and ecological impact is my main concern about natalism.<sup>15</sup> In the USA there are more births than deaths, for example in 2008 there were 4.25 million births and 2.47 million deaths (Census Bureau); a large annual increase. One contribution to sustainability would be for US births to fall rapidly to replacement level (Ruether 221). I refer here not to a so-called “replacement level” Total Fertility Rate of 2.1 (which the USA roughly has) but to the actual number of births and deaths becoming equal.<sup>16</sup> Most segments of US society are trending to lower fertility, but Protestant natalism pushes the birth rate higher than it would otherwise be.

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14. Phillip Longman is Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation.

15. Murtagh and Schlax calculate the long-term ecological impact of each US birth.

16. The anomaly of persistent increase despite “replacement-level” TFR has multiple causes and their relative weight varies from one nation to another. One cause is the tempo effect of the average age of childbearing having risen over recent decades. This stretches the birth total over a longer time period. It means, to illustrate with a hypothetical case, even if women had the same number of children as women of an earlier generation, the official TFR would be lower. For example, France in 1985-89 had an official TFR of 1.81, but 2.21 if adjusted for tempo. This flaw has been recognized since the 1950s but none of the proposed alternatives has displaced the established methodology (Bongaarts and Feeney).

Another cause of persistent growth with a TFR below 2.1 is falling death rates. In most nations, including the USA and UK, life expectancy has been rising for decades. Since the death rate has been falling, for total births to match deaths the TFR would have to fall below 2 for as long as life expectancy continues rising, and some years after that. A TFR around 2 would only deliver genuine “replacement fertility” (births=deaths) if other factors had been constant (or cancelled out) for decades past.



The differences are significant, for example in GSS data the birth rate of liberal Protestants is lower than fundamentalist Protestants:<sup>17</sup> in 2003 their TFRs were 1.84 and 2.13 respectively (Skirbekk, Kaufmann and Goujon 298). Multivariate analysis shows higher fecundity is only partly explainable by socioeconomic factors such as occupation, income, residence, or education (Lehrer; McQuillan; Hayford and Morgan), and religiosity is an independent variable. The mechanism of religion's effect is debated: some analysts point to doctrines relating to reproduction, but most emphasize a community's norms for gender and family. Whether it shapes behaviour or merely reinforces an ideology with other roots, natalist biblical interpretation performs some function in Protestant fertility differentials.

How many people are persuaded by natalist exegesis, and what effect does it have on ideal family size, or age at marriage? The data to answer these questions numerically does not exist, so I rely on impressions and indirect evidence. Kathryn Joyce estimates the number who self-identify as Quiverfull in the USA is "low tens of thousands" (134), but that is only a subset of natalists: the procreationists. Broader natalism is noticed by David Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist, who reported a "spiritual movement" which he called "natalism ... sweeping across the United States." He observed that they "tend to marry earlier" and "they are having three, four or more kids." He noted that they "attend religious services more often" (a measure of religiosity) and also that "many are willing to move to find places that are congenial to natalist values." The observation of a tendency to marry younger is supported by a 2004 analysis of the National Survey on Family Growth which found the probability of (first) marriage by age twenty in the USA is 17% for Mormons and fundamentalist Protestants, compared to 9% for mainline Protestants, and only 5% for Catholics (Lehrer 718). The link between Protestant fundamentalism and the proximate determinants of higher fertility is clear.

There is far less evidence for the role of biblical interpretation, but research by Patricia Goodson and Christopher Ellison is suggestive.<sup>18</sup> A survey of ministerial

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17. Protestants are categorized as fundamentalist, moderate, liberal, black, in the General Social Survey, the main data source for literature on religion and fertility in the USA.

18. Christopher G. Ellison is Professor of Social Science at the University of Texas.

trainees at ten American Protestant seminaries found that “differences in the interpretation of Genesis 1:28a ... lie at the center of current Protestant debates over family planning” (Ellison and Goodson 514). They tested three statements about how Genesis 1:28a “should be interpreted.” The first was “a command from God for people to have as many children as they can.” The second was “a blessing from God, and people can decide how many children they wish to or can have.” The third was “a general mandate for humans to procreate, and each couple makes their own decision as to how many children they will have” (518).<sup>19</sup> Stronger agreement (on a 1-5 scale) with either the first or second statement was associated with more negative attitudes to family planning. They also found that inerrancy belief strengthened that negative attitude among those choosing the first two interpretive options (520). Only the third statement about Genesis 1:28, as a general mandate, was associated with more positive attitudes to family planning.

It seems likely that currently in the USA belief in inerrancy is associated with natalism, but this is not inevitable: it depends on the specific biblical interpretation adopted. That can be shown through an historical example. Donald and Jo Parkerson studied an 1885 town directory from the midwestern USA which recorded for each woman socioeconomic and religious affiliation data, and the dates of all children born, not just survivors (55). They classified religion affiliation as pietist (analogous to Evangelicalism), liturgical (Catholic and Episcopal), or unchurched. They found pietist women had a lower fertility at 2.92 compared to liturgical women who had 3.94 children each. After marriage pietists delayed their first child longer, for 32 months, and between a second and a third child they delayed over 4 years on average (59). Using diaries and devotional literature they found “causal links between the ideas of 19th century evangelical pietism and conscious family limitation” (50), specifically the women’s desire to gain time for personal sanctification, a duty of intense Christian upbringing that resulted in “fewer children of greater spiritual quality,” and a confidence that evangelism would grow the church (61). Those pietists were as inerrantist as any Evangelical today but were pioneers of family

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19. For my purposes it is unhelpful that in each of the three tested statements an exegesis was combined with an (assumed) application. I would prefer separate testing of these.

limitation. This suggests that biblicism<sup>20</sup> does not necessarily lead to natalism. Biblical inerrancy has no fixed relation to one option in interpretation. For many other verses biblicists accept typological and figurative exegeses, and reception history shows cases in which individuals or large groups of biblicists have altered or abandoned a particular interpretation (Boone 45).

Debating biblical interpretation is not a waste of time. Kathleen Boone notes, with regard to political issues, that many observers judge conservative Christians to be “hiding behind the Bible” and “cynically manipulating a sacred text to garner divine sanction” for their own agenda, but she judges those Christians to be sincere (1). I will take at face value natalist confessions that the primary motivator of their belief and practice is the Bible. Kathryn Joyce was told by a leader of the Quiverfull movement that a troubled mother asked their online forum to give her “a reason - besides the Bible - why one should be Quiverfull. The answers were quick and pointed: apart from Scripture, there’s really no reason ... Kids are great and all that, but in reality, it’s all about the Bible” (169).

Biblical interpretation may be culturally shaped but has transformative power in itself. Richard Hornok (a natalist but not a procreationist) for his D.Min. project implemented a teaching program, with tests before and after delivery to Evangelicals from local churches.<sup>21</sup> It resulted in “a significant attitudinal shift toward the biblical perspective” (Abstract). In answer to a question: “Which one factor is most important in determining the number of children one has?” the percentage responses from his “experimental group” were as follows (140):

<i>Factor</i>	<i>% Before</i>	<i>% After</i>
Health	22	19
Desire to be a parent	33	38
Financial	15	4
Career	0	0
Age of parents	0	0

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20. Biblicism is a belief in biblical inerrancy, combined with a belief that guidance for all questions of life and conduct today can be found in the Bible, and willingness to comply.

21. There were 36 people in Hornok’s “experimental group” and others in a control group.

Combination of above	11	0
God's Will/Desire	15	27

Even more striking, when asked what are the acceptable reasons for family planning, whereas before the program the responses had been 77% “complete freedom” and 23% “selfless reasons only”, after Hornok’s program only 13% chose “complete freedom” and 87% now considered only “selfless reasons” valid (138). This suggests that, without any change in cultural context, the presentation of a new exegesis can change ideas about God’s view of reproduction.

The US audience for natalist exegesis is large. The population of the USA was 308 million in 2010 (Census Bureau). About half are Protestant and (according to a 2011 Gallup poll) among Protestants 41% affirm that “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” compared with 46% who affirmed “the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it is to be taken literally,” and 10% who affirmed “the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts, recorded by man” (Jones).<sup>22</sup> The US homeschool movement, among whose teachers the natalist renaissance began, has over a million children within its ranks according to the US Department of Education, and Kathryn Joyce considers this an under-estimate (ix).

Natalism has been presented as a solution for ecclesiastical anxieties. For example, the *Great Commission Resurgence*, a declaration by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2009, warns in its tenth and final clause that: “Too many Southern Baptists have embraced unbiblical notions about marriage and family. Too often we believe that children are a burden rather than a blessing and smaller families are more ‘responsible’ than large families” (SBC). The lead author, Daniel Akin,<sup>23</sup> interviewed after its launch, said: “Dr. Mohler has pointed out ... You can almost document the decline of baptisms within the Southern Baptist Convention as the decline in the number of children that Baptists have” (Wax). When recruitment is disappointing, natalism can seem attractive to far-sighted church leaders, in a context of denominational rivalry and US culture wars.

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22. By contrast the figures for US Catholics were 21%, 65%, and 9% respectively.

23. Daniel Akin is Professor of Preaching and Theology, at Southeastern Seminary.

Natalism is also amenable to secular anxieties and may be co-opted by those concerned about the geopolitics of demography. Nationalists, racists and nativists<sup>24</sup> desire to strengthen their nation, or ethno-linguistic group. Corporations have an interest in growing their pool of labour and customers (Longman, *Empty Cradle* 41). Assistance to parents through progressive policies such as extensive maternity leave and subsidized childcare are effective in raising birth rates (Brewer, Ratcliffe and Smith), but are expensive for governments (Rivkin-Fish 708), so promoting natalism is cheaper. Given that secular appeals for higher fecundity as patriotic duty have in recent history been ineffectual, harnessing religious natalism could look attractive to secular natalists. Also alliances of interest might influence family policy in the US (which already since 1998 has granted tax credits for each additional child), and that would amplify the influence of natalist preaching.

The prospect of Evangelical natalists spreading their ideas in the USA is their primary significance, but it is also possible that their example and influence might disseminate natalism to international Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. A pattern of diffusion from US teachers to other nations has been observed in the case of the Prosperity Gospel. For example, the influence of Kenneth Hagin, T.L. Osborn, and other American prosperity teachers has been detected in the UK, Sweden, and Nigeria (Gifford; Coleman 120). Natalism could spread in a similar way, for example Allan Carlson has organized international events promoting the “Natural Family” (Buss and Herman 3). I have not discovered natalist publications from the UK, apart from a few pages in a book by SPUC’s Evangelical wing (Anonymous 34-39),<sup>25</sup> but there may be UK natalism which I have not detected because it has no homegrown literature. The potential impact of Protestant natalism is my justification for choosing this reception of Scripture.

### **Scope and primary sources**

This project does not evaluate all recent natalism that draws on biblical texts. The scope of my search for primary sources was guided by my interest in the recent

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24. Nativism is a preference that inhabitants have an ancestry of generations born in that country, and seeks to maintain a numerical and cultural predominance of old-stock people.

25. SPUC is the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children.

renaissance of natalism as an articulate ideology among people whose parents and grandparents had small families, who live in nations with long experience of low death rates. Here I am not interested in the cultural valuation of high fecundity that was ubiquitous in pre-modern societies and persists today in traditional cultures, but is slowly fading. It is sustained more by kin and peer pressure than by preaching. Examples in the USA include the Amish and Hutterites. It persists in some less industrialized nations, but even if I had found natalist reception from such places,<sup>26</sup> which I have not, it would have been outside the scope of my project.

My particular concern is the spread of natalism among English-speaking Evangelicals (my own affiliation) whose large ecological footprints make any increase in fertility significant for sustainability. This audience is unlikely to be influenced by sources in languages other than English or with a provenance outside Evangelicalism, so those two criteria guided the scope of my project. In my search of bibliographic databases I looked for natalist OT reception regardless of provenance and the substantial sources found all came from US Evangelicalism. Subsequently my search in grey literature concentrated on that sector.

Catholic natalism exists in the USA today. In the 19th and early 20th centuries nationalist Catholic natalism was strong in France (Camiscioli; Barusse) and Italy (Ipsen). In recent decades Catholic natalist publications have been rare and the few instances (e.g. Weigel) do not make substantial use of OT verses. Jason Adams, in a book which carries commendations by three Catholic archbishops, includes OT citations in connection with anti-contraceptive teaching, but not for natalism, which only features in a quotation from the Catechism: “Scripture and the Church’s traditional practice see in large families a sign of God’s blessing” (Adams 19). The book’s collection of homilies by bishops and priests offers one other instance: a claim that small families means fewer vocations (111). Even if relevant Catholic sources had been found they would have been outside my scope, but Catholic natalism is a significant topic in its own right.

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26. There may be natalist preaching among Pentecostals outside the USA (personal communication from Professor John Guillebaud, 13 July 2010).

Orthodox natalism exists today in Europe and Russia, perhaps having persisted from the early 20th century manifestation observed by Fagley (164), or resurgent because of Orthodoxy's location in states of the former Soviet Union which have the world's lowest birth rates. For example in 2007 the Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II, promised to baptize personally any child whose birth order was third or greater, and has been credited with a subsequent increase in Georgia's birth rate (Esslemont). I have found no recent source with substantial natalist OT reception, but Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, lamenting US moral decay, suggests "the most subversive and effective strategy traditionalists might undertake would be ..."

militant fecundity: abundant, relentless, exuberant, and defiant childbearing. Given the reluctance of modern men and women to be fruitful and multiply, it would not be difficult, surely, for the devout to accomplish — in no more than a generation or two — a demographic revolution. ... if it is a war we want, we should not recoil from sacrifice. (Hart 88) <sup>27</sup>

My project is limited to reception within Christian communities as my method for evaluation uses comparison with Christian tradition. Therefore, although natalist reception of Torah by *Haredi* Jews exists it is outside my scope. Similarly natalism among Mormons (Latter Day Saints) is excluded as they have distinctive doctrines linking salvation and reproduction, which differ from Protestantism. Secular natalism is resurgent in Russia (Rivkin-Fish) and Italy (Krause and Marchesi), and occasionally allusions such as "go forth and multiply" appear, but it is excluded by my selection principle that Old Testament reception must be substantial.

Even with this limited scope, the quantity of natalist OT reception online and in sermons is huge. A general rule for research on modern popular reception is that it cannot be exhaustively surveyed but only sampled. The criteria for sampling must be explicit, and the selection representative. I did not interview adherents: that approach would bias the study to unlimited natalists, who are more spectacular than limited natalists.<sup>28</sup> I excluded blogs and other informal online material due to their quantity. The primary sources identified here include all books and journal articles which

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27. Hart's phrase "militant fecundity" was later picked up by natalist bloggers. David Bentley Hart is Professor of Christian Culture at Providence College, RI.

28. One reality TV series "19 Kids and Counting" about the Duggars, a Quiverfull family, has a weekly average 1.4 million viewers (Mesaros-Winckles 2).

contain substantial presentation of natalist biblical reception.<sup>29</sup> Some chapters within monographs on other topics were found,<sup>30</sup> but systematic search for them was not attempted. The sources are all by conservative Protestants, and all from the USA.<sup>31</sup> One might expect sources from other strongholds of conservative Protestantism such as Australia and South Africa, but none were found. Kaufmann (161-63) mentions the Laestadian Lutherans of Finland, and the Orthodox Calvinists of the Netherlands as sects practising what he calls “endogenous growth” but I did not come across any natalist publications from either of those groups.

My primary sources, all those in which natalism is a major theme, and is supported with biblical citation and exegesis, are by Mary Pride, Allan Carlson, Charles Provan, Max Heine, Samuel Owen, Calvin Beisner, Rick and Jan Hess, Nancy Campbell, Richard Hornok, Douglas Wilson, Robert Andrews, Tim Bayly, John Jefferson Davis, Rachel Giove Scott, James and Shannon French, Craig Houghton, Steve and Candice Watters, R. C. Sproul Junior, Daniel Akin, and online articles by Albert Mohler between 2003 and 2010. The authors include lay people and pastors and some academic writers. The sources are mostly from ecclesiastical publishers, and a few are self-published. Even so, they are higher quality sources than the mass of fragmentary online material sharing these ideas. Academic authors have produced a few articles, chapters or sections, expressing natalist ideas. Owen, Beisner, Wilson, Mohler, Akin, and Davis are academics in theology or ethics, based at seminaries and Christian colleges.<sup>32</sup> Carlson is an historian based at a thinktank. Sproul, Wilson, Bayly, and Hornok are ministers, and the remainder are lay people. None is an academic biblical scholar.

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29. The search terms I used in bibliographic databases were fruitful, multiply, fertility, fecundity, reproducti\* (asterisk finds alternate suffixes), birth, demograph\*, population, contracepti\*, family planning, marriage, procreation, sons and children.

30. The isolated chapters are by Sproul and Davis.

31. All my primary sources were published in the USA. Nancy Campbell is originally from Australia, and Craig Houghton from Canada, but both are based in the USA.

32. I prioritized academics and denominational leaders, so as Albert Mohler has not yet produced a book or article on this topic I resorted to his online writings.



This project adopts a categorization proposed by Daniel Doriani.<sup>33</sup> He observes Christians fall into “three camps,” which are first, those who consider family size a matter of personal preference; second, those who commend larger family size but allow family planning; and third, those who say “let God plan your family” and also “stridently lobby for large families” (Doriani 26). The second and third camps are both natalist. Doriani offers the labels “large but limited” and “unlimited” for these camps.<sup>34</sup> The former are planned natalists, or rather plain natalists who do not also subscribe to procreationism. Of the seventeen writers listed above I classify eight as unlimited: Pride, Provan, Hess, Campbell, Scott, French, Houghton, and Sproul. The remainder favour large-but-limited families: Carlson, North, Owen, Beisner, Heine, Hornok, Wilson, Davis, Watters, and Mohler.

Do the primary sources have any influence in persuading people to natalism or reinforcing their practice? One test, albeit only relevant to the unlimited type, was a survey of Quiverfull forum posts for two years ending January 2011. These include testimonies of how individuals became convinced, and recommendations of books for enquirers.<sup>35</sup> Hess, Pride, and Campbell feature, for example “I read the book [Hess] and was convinced” (September 2009); “This book [Pride] was such a God-send. It answered so many of my questions” (December 2010). One wife read Campbell and Hess to her husband and “halfway through *A Full Quiver* he was convinced” (February 2010). Often the books are part of a long enquiry. “*The Way Home* [Pride] was the start of a lot of thinking for us” (September 2010). The same books are commended, as is Provan’s book in its audio version (April 2010). “We decided to be QF together after listening to a message by Voddie Baucham [author of *Family Driven Faith*]” (April 2009). However, the Bible is cited far more than anything else as the decisive influence.<sup>36</sup>

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33. Daniel Doriani until 2003 was Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, and his doctorate is from Westminster Theological Seminary. He is senior pastor of a Presbyterian church. <<http://www.centralpres.com/WhoWeAre/PastoralStaff.htm>>

34. They reject this label, as what they commend is direct family planning by God.

35. The 1000+ posts are mostly about practical matters of childbirth and childrearing.

36. Biblical citations in the forum were not systematically analyzed, but it seems the range of verses cited is similar to those appearing in Hess, Pride, Campbell, etc.

There is a small secondary literature on a few of my primary sources, limited to the earlier sources up to 1990. There are two articles<sup>37</sup> devoted to individual sources: Pride's book was critiqued by Jeffrey Meyers<sup>38</sup> in 1997, and Provan's by James Jordan<sup>39</sup> in 1993. Pride, Provan and Hess (all three from the unlimited camp) are critiqued by Daniel Doriani, and briefly by Patricia Goodson ("Ethics"). The critics focus on the sources' condemnation of family planning, which from a pastoral perspective they regard as legalistic and harmful. Jordan emphasizes that "nowhere does the Bible forbid family planning" (3). Meyers warns that Pride "continues to provide the intellectual foundation" of a movement to forbid family planning and "because of Pride's book this subject has become a controversial and divisive issue in American Evangelical and Reformed churches" (4, 9). The widest coverage of sources is in Richard Hornok's D.Min. thesis, which gives most attention to Pride but also looks at Provan, Heine, Owen and Davis (the last two being limited natalists). Hornok's question is whether it is "permissible to space and limit the number of children one has?"(4) and it is unsurprising that he does not criticise the core of natalist ideology, the advocacy of high birth rates.

### **The fruitful verses and Christian reproduction**

While there is little secondary literature specifically on the primary sources, some look at Christian reception of the OT fruitful verses, and consider what is appropriate modern application. Raymond van Leeuwen,<sup>40</sup> writing in *Christianity Today* in 2001 warns readers against those who claim that God has "commanded married people to have children," who "claim Genesis 1:28 ... as a proof text," and

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37. Both originally appeared in the periodical *Contra Mundum* which is published by a conservative Protestant ministry <<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/>>.

38. Jeffrey Meyers is Senior Pastor, Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church. He has a doctorate from Concordia Theological Seminary, and is the author of a commentary on Ecclesiastes published by Athanasius Press in 2007.

39. James B. Jordan is the Director of Biblical Horizons. He has a Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary. His books include a defence of *Creation in Six Days*, and three published by Wipf & Stock including *Essays in Reconstruction*. Jordan has also co-authored with Gary North, a leading Reconstructionist.

40. Raymond van Leeuwen is Professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern College.

also “argue on the basis of the created order” (59). Leeuwen’s main concern is their forbidding of contraception (60) rather than their natalism.

Kenneth Magnuson<sup>41</sup> writes out of pastoral concern for infertile couples who feel obliged to pursue fertility treatments due to a belief that not doing so would disobey God. He quotes a Jewish woman, who lamented that “I am an *akarah*—a barren woman ... I hear the words ... *P’ru ur’vu*. God’s command to be fruitful and multiply has been given again,” and he finds “a similar understanding of Genesis 1:28 is held by some Christians” (Magnuson 26, 38).

Some have considered interpretation of the fruitful verses in connection with the issue of population: Richard Fagley<sup>42</sup> in 1960, David Yegerlehner in 1974, and Susan Bratton<sup>43</sup> in 1992. None of them cites any recent natalists (and the first two predate all of my natalist sources), but they do allude to natalist arguments and biblical reception from earlier years.

Fagley begins with problems of global demography and development. He surveys attitudes to family planning in world religions, before turning to the Bible, and then a history of ideas in Christianity’s major branches. He considers the rate of population growth (in the 1950s) too rapid, and calls for “responsible parenthood” (5). He commends Protestantism for adapting to demographic reality, but sees problems in other religious groups. He cites a 1937 pro-fertility Orthodox writing from Greece (164), and refers to a “fertility cult” in 1950s Catholicism, supplying three examples (180, 185). These “would serve as a mother lode of valuable material. I refrain from exploiting it, however, since I cannot convince myself that it is more than a passing aberration” and also as a Protestant he is “reluctant to make sectarian points” (184). Of the arguments of the “pro-fertility parties,” he briefly observes that they hope for “economic miracles” and “fall back on trust in divine providence” (184), but he does not say whether they use OT texts.

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41. Kenneth Magnuson is Professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Seminary.

42. Richard Fagley was Secretary of the Commission on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, a theologian, and a Congregational minister.

43. Susan Bratton is faculty chair of Environmental Science at Baylor University. She has a doctorate in Botany with Plant Ecology, and an MA in Theology.

Yegerlehner, a Methodist minister, observed in the early 1970s that “abundant human fertility is a cause for great alarm” (2), and so there is “little room for ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ ... in contemporary theology.” He aims to discover “possible meanings for our generation” rather than simply ignoring this “word of God” (3) and he continues that “we are by no means free to assume that the commandment to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ no longer applies ... or that it can now simply be overlooked as ‘fulfilled’.” He knows his readers are wary of “an enthusiastic literal understanding” but reassures them that the “Old Testament ideal ... need not be thrown in our faces as a text which prohibits population control” (211).<sup>44</sup> In his later chapter surveying “Contemporary Reactions,” he alludes to natalist writers.

Bratton developed a “Christian ethic for human population regulation” (26). Her book is mostly concerned with demographic history and sustainability, but a chapter entitled “Abraham’s Seed: The Bible and Reproduction” observes that “in favor of large families, Christians often confidently cite God’s instructions to Adam and Eve ... [and] a superficial application to family life suggests that Jews and Christians should have as many children as possible” (42). Elsewhere she recounts five “specifically Christian” arguments, including a claim that to limit one’s family size “disobeys biblical commands to be fruitful and multiply and disregards biblical valuing of children” but cites no sources (130-31). The only natalist writing she cites is by Harold Brown, who “criticized denominations with declining birth rates and suggested Christians from industrial nations ought to meet biblical mandates to reproduce” in a 1985 *Christianity Today* editorial (124).

The interval since 1992 would alone justify revisiting this topic as there have been since then developments in Near Eastern archaeology, Biblical Studies, and ecological footprint analysis. One way my project differs from those by Fagley, Yegerlehner, and Bratton is its close analysis of natalist writings.

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44. Yegerlehner identified 101 “fruitfulness verses,” but some are secondary allusions, e.g. “For though your people be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return” (Isaiah 10:22). Some do not mention fertility, e.g. “the multitude of men and cattle within it” (Zechariah 2:4), and a few lack any reference to quantity, e.g. “I will bring forth descendants from Jacob” (Isaiah 65:9). My comparison with the verses used by natalists shows overlap, but a few are not used and they use many verses not on Yegerlehner’s list.

## Theory and methodology

I derive a methodology suitable for this project through looking at examples of academic engagement with non-academic interpretation of the Bible, and through discussions of theoretical issues and methods associated with this genre. Stefan Klint writes about “reception criticism” that “how this is to be done in practice is far from self-evident, since no specific methodology or theoretical framework yet exists” (Klint 89). John Sawyer at a consultation to outline a framework for the Blackwell commentary series, points to Hans Jauss and *Rezeptionsaesthetik* as offering a theoretical basis (*Reception*). These ideas from literary disciplines are adapted for use in the field of biblical reception by David Parris. The methodology of reception criticism is not yet well established, and that is especially true for any effort to not only analyze but also evaluate reception.

My approach requires an understanding of the instances of reception on their own terms, before venturing evaluation and construction of alternative interpretation. There are precedents for this among works by biblical scholars and theologians, for example in essays by Willem Vorster and Douglas Bax against *Apartheid* exegesis, and articles by Craig Koester and Loren Johns on the use of New Testament verses in the *Left Behind* novels. These combinations of analysis and evaluation are however rare. On the one hand some scholars signal that their work was provoked by popular reception of certain Scriptures, but without discussing those receptions move directly to construct alternative applications.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand those who have analyzed popular biblical reception usually refrain from evaluating it exegetically, perhaps because judgement is deemed incompatible with a Cultural Studies approach. The latter therefore do not provide a methodology for my project as a whole, but they do indicate how one can undertake the first part, analysis of popular reception. I will turn to this now, and afterward will return to the question of how one might evaluate a popular interpretation.

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45. An example is David Petersen on “family values” in Genesis.

### Analysis of reception

The foundational task is to examine the use of Scripture in the reception. This begins with identification of which verses are quoted, cited or alluded to, for it is “imperative for the reception critic to show how the supposed biblical presence is made manifest” (Klint 92). An “exercise in cataloguing” is a necessary though only preliminary task (Økland 23). For this project a database of reception of Scripture in selected primary sources was constructed to facilitate analysis.<sup>46</sup> Using that data the function of Scripture in natalist writing is explored. The relative importance of different verses in the scheme of reception are weighed, not only by frequency of references, but also by assessment of the verse’s function. The various arguments are classified, and then the common features and differences between the two natalist camps or types (limited and unlimited), and between writers are identified. A large part of chapter 2 is devoted to those tasks.

Reception critics look at how readers’ interpretations are shaped by cultural context. One aspect is the particular framework of doctrine and hermeneutics through which the readers’ reception is worked out. This helps one discern the internal logic and “the integrity of the system when seen from the point of view” of the receptors (Newport 155). Another aspect is immediate historical context, for example the sociological situation of the receptors. Some studies expose the political and class interests of interpreters, and show how choices in exegesis arise from the location of the exegetes. For example Amy Frykholm’s study of “Rapture” preachers is mostly concerned with anthropology. This has been done for the Quiverfull type of natalist by Kathryn Joyce who makes only brief comments on biblical usage (8, 134). In any case it is peripheral to my approach. Chapter 2 briefly considers aspects of the US cultural context of natalist writers.

Some studies investigate the historical development leading to a reception and explore its continuity with or divergence from earlier interpretation. For example, Johannes Loubser<sup>47</sup> traces the ancestry of *Apartheid* exegeses back to the 19th

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46. The method of construction and tables of detailed results are in the Appendix.

47. Johannes Loubser is Professor of New Testament, University of Zululand.

century. Kenneth Newport tracks an “eisegetical trajectory” from modern Adventism back to 19th century premillennialism and then back to 16th century millennarians (155). In the case of natalism, an effort to trace its genealogy systematically would be interesting but is not attempted in this project. I have chosen to focus on one aspect of genealogy: the use of Luther’s writings by some natalists who claim him as a forerunner. Goodson is the only critic to comment on this claim and she seems to accept it, writing: “Provan is by no means the first to argue along these lines. He finds support, for example, from the writings of Martin Luther” (“Ethics” 37). Some natalists do not cite Luther; some quote Protestants from the early 20th century, and a few do not claim any historic root apart from Scripture. However, reception theory as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that influential past interpreters shape subsequent reception even if the reader has no direct knowledge of past writings, because they all stand in the stream of Christian reception. This applies to natalists, to their audiences, and their critics. Chapter 3 will investigate to what extent Luther was a forerunner of Protestant natalism.

### **Evaluation of reception**

Many studies of popular reception stop after analysis without adding exegetical evaluation. This raises a question why evaluation might be considered inappropriate, and I see two types of argument coming from opposite perspectives. One reason is based on a strong distinction between scholarly and popular reception. For example, Newport judges “eisegesis is more or less endemic” in “contemporary non-critical biblical studies” (23). From this viewpoint, popular interpretation that differs from the scholarly consensus is simply in error. If its implausibility is sufficiently obvious, or if existing works of biblical scholarship address the exegetical issues raised, then it does not warrant an additional labour of evaluation. For example, Newport points his readers toward particular commentaries on Revelation where they can discover why Adventist reception is eisegesis.<sup>48</sup> I contend that in the case of natalism it is not obviously implausible, and also its modern application is not directly addressed by scholarly OT commentaries.

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48. Elsewhere in his book however Newport does include his own exegetical critique of the Adventist use of type and anti-type.

The alternative argument against evaluation arises from a post-modern approach that levels readers by refusing to privilege academic over lay interpreters. Segovia claims “informed readings can no longer be perceived as hermeneutically privileged” (15). Daniel Patte recommends that “different readings proposed by ordinary readers should be welcomed and affirmed as legitimate” (11). This could be taken as a reason why evaluation of interpretation should not be attempted. I contend however that equal respect for “ordinary readers” should not exempt their readings from evaluation. If it is worthy of analysis then it is also worthy of critique. Stefan Klint is not averse to evaluative critique in principle, for although he claims that reception criticism is primarily a “descriptive task, rather than a normative one,” he speculates that it may optionally “also include some kind of theological evaluation and application for the modern situation” (91).

The problem is establishing a method to evaluate popular biblical reception. There are various models for doing this. Anglican tradition suggests a triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason. Richard Bauckham argues that to evaluate modern use of Scripture (in politics) requires parallel awareness of multiple contexts. “If a biblical text is not to mean whatever we want it to mean, we must pay disciplined attention to its original and canonical contexts. But if it is to mean something for us, we must pay equally disciplined attention to the contemporary context” (*Politics* 16). While this does not provide a ready-made method, it does suggest that evaluation should be multifaceted and multidisciplinary.

Walter Moberly in a chapter opposing Christian Zionist interpretation of Genesis 12:3 offers a valuable practical example of how to combine analysis and evaluation of popular reception (162-78). He brings together five components to accomplish this: description of the popular reception through quotations from a representative sample of Zionists; analysis of its roots in past Dispensationalism; comparison with the “plain sense” of the verse in its original context; comparison with New Testament reception of the same verse; and the contemporary context of US and Middle East politics.<sup>49</sup> These five correspond methodologically to the five

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49. Moberly notes that, given the limits of treatment within a single chapter, he lacks space to consider the second and fifth items.



remaining chapters of my thesis.<sup>50</sup> The first two components contribute toward understanding popular reception, while the latter three facilitate a critique. My method for evaluation requires three components: the original OT context, Christian tradition, and contemporary context. A combination of these is necessary for a robust evaluation of reception as none is sufficient alone.

### **Ancient Near East**

In the task of evaluation of popular applications of biblical verses, the role of historical-critical exegesis by biblical scholars is foundational. Ideally it will describe and delimit the range of meanings that a text could plausibly have had for its writers and original readers. The data here are the text and historical situation. Knowledge about many aspects of the ancient Near East, such as agriculture, demography, and politics, has advanced in recent decades, mostly owing to archaeology. To determine the “plain sense” of a text scholars deploy various critical techniques (Barton 7). They consider a verse’s canonical relation to the rest of the OT and its theologies. The first part of chapter 4 uses this approach to consider the fruitful verses. That serves as a baseline, for without it a text might mean anything anyone wants it to mean (Thiselton 1). Biblical scholarship is however insufficient in two ways.

For some biblical texts, though biblical scholars do narrow down the number of plausible meanings to a few, they lack consensus and cannot arbitrate between the remaining options. For example, when scholars have criticized natalist reception of “be fruitful and multiply” the most common argument is that it is not a command but (only) a blessing (Van Leeuwen; Tucker). There is however no consensus on this point: many do identify it as a command. This is discussed in detail in chapter 4. More broadly, ideas about the meaning of the fruitful verses can still vary widely: they can be construed as cultural pragmatism, or an accommodation to a prosperity cult, or as ethnocentric and competitive xenophobia, depending on differing views about the emphases of OT theology.

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50. Consideration of New Testament reception of Genesis 12:3 functions in Moberly’s work as an instance of early Christian reception of the Old Testament, and dispensationalism provides the historical genealogy of Christian Zionism.

A more fundamental problem is that the “original meaning” of an OT verse (even if it were accessible and agreed) is not a suitable guide for Christian behaviour. Sawyer writes about other instances of objectionable popular reception that “their crimes are not against the original meaning of the text, indeed, the interpretation may on occasion come very near it” (*Culture* 4). This is a dispensational problem: the “raw” meaning of Old Testament verses should not prescribe Christian application. However this does not detract from the fundamental importance of historical studies. Gadamer uses the example of legal hermeneutics, in which the jurist works to “mediate between the original application and the present application” (325). He argues that anyone “seeking to understand the correct meaning of a law must first know the original one ... but here historical understanding serves merely as a means to an end” (326). While the capability of modern biblical scholarship to fulfil even this limited role is debatable, it surely offers the nearest approach one can make towards discernment of the “original meaning” of OT texts. As such it is the first step towards evaluation of popular biblical application.

### **Christian Tradition**

The second step is to draw on classic ecclesiastical reception of the same verses. This is helpful in a number of ways. Dale Allison makes the minimal claim that “sometimes the [modern] exegetical tradition has forgotten what it should have remembered” (237), so past interpretation is a deposit of wisdom that is profitable to consult. Sawyer identifies a more general utility because “awareness of the many meanings that a text has when read ... down the centuries, has great heuristic value in the process of establishing and evaluating a meaning” (*Reception*). When we face disputes between modern Christians about conflicting interpretations it is, argues John Lee Thompson (*Reading* 221), not only helpful but necessary to converse with earlier Christians. This is not to imagine a patristic consensus or a “paleo-orthodoxy” that can be used to decide between conflicting modern receptions (Tanner and Hall). Since we face the dispensational problem of deriving moral guidance from the Old Testament, it would be foolish to neglect patristic Christian wisdom gained from long wrestling with precisely this problem. Their “spiritual” exegesis developed christological and other methods for transforming the often unedifying acts, words, and attitudes of the Israelite patriarchs into lessons suitable for the church. Attention

to historical reception, as here in chapters 5 and 6, helps provide some continuity with classic Christian thought.

Fagley and Bratton, researching Christian ideas about population, do look at patristic writings, but without much expectation of finding helpful insights. Instead the early writers are portrayed as part of the problem. “Augustine’s condemnation of both contraceptive method and contraceptive intent leaves little room for any kind of family limitation in his doctrine” (Fagley 174). Susan Bratton considers “the Western church chose a generally pronatalist stance” for married people, and sent a “mixed message on procreation” (76-77). Both treat anti-contraceptive ideas as if they were natalist, and they accept the stereotype of Christian asceticism as a two-tier system whose ideal was a small celibate elite shepherding a flock of married people who were expected to breed prolifically. That picture may have been true of 19th century European nationalist versions of Catholicism, but it has been unfairly projected back on to Augustine and the patristic period.

My method is to put questions arising from contemporary issues to past Christian writings, trusting they can offer insights unavailable elsewhere. Gadamer confesses: “I must allow tradition’s claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me” (361). A similar method called *ressourcement* was pioneered in the 20th century by Henri de Lubac. In recent years appreciation of patristic exegesis among Protestants has risen (Williams 15), as indicated for example by the series currently being published by Baker Academic entitled *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church’s Future*.

A practical problem for this method is the volume of past Christian reception. Some of the critics in my literature survey do consider tradition but all take a broad survey approach. Fagley sweeps through the whole of church history in sixty pages. Yegerlehner considers nineteen Fathers of east and west from the 2nd through 5th centuries, as well as Aquinas, Hugh of St Victor, Luther, and Calvin. Jeremy Cohen, who looks only at Genesis 1:28, covers Jewish and Christian reception from the earliest records up to 1500. This breadth results in brief summaries with minimal historical context. However for my purpose of *ressourcement* a narrow and deep approach is preferable.

This raises a question of criteria for the selection of past exegetes. Parris points to Hans Jauss's helpful metaphor which he describes variously as "der Gipfeldialog der Autoren" and as "der Höhenkamm der Autoren" (Parris, *Reception* 216). The imagery is a high ridge of a mountain range where a few peaks define the basic shape of the skyline even though much irregular detail exists between them.<sup>51</sup> The idea is that typically a very small number of historical interpreters have been decisively significant in shaping and redirecting a text's reception (Parris, *Giants* 118, 202). My priority is to include one Early Church Father, as they have a special status in shaping distinctively Christian exegesis, and one of the 16th century Reformers, as many Protestants consider them formative, and even normative, for Christian exegesis. That IVP is publishing two book series on *Reformation Commentary* and *Ancient Christian Commentary* testifies to the special status of Reformers and Fathers for Protestant *ressourcement*.

Augustine of Hippo is the patristic representative chosen here. In the early centuries of Christianity the significance of biological reproduction was intensely debated, and Augustine dominated subsequent reflection on the topic in the west. In part that reflects Augustine's general predominance,<sup>52</sup> but it is also due to subsequent valuation of his innovative resolution of tensions in Christian thought on the origin, past, present and future of reproduction. Also, with regard to the key text "be fruitful and multiply" Cohen's magisterial survey judges Augustine made the "single most influential contribution to the Christian career of Gen. 1:28" and that later exegetes added little that was new until Luther (21). Martin Luther is my Reformation representative and he already features earlier in my thesis as part of the effort to understand natalist reception and its roots, so chapter 3 has a dual function. Luther sits well alongside Augustine for he deemed him the best of the Fathers. By happy coincidence Augustine is also the Father most respected by Evangelicals, the potential future audience of natalist preaching.

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51. I find the phrase "summit dialogue" unhelpful as my initial impression from the phrase was of key interpreters meeting on a mountain-top, whereas Jauss's idea is a trajectory across history represented by an Alpine skyline that includes multiple summits.

52. For example the *Glossa ordinaria*, the standard medieval Catholic compilation of Bible commentary is dominated by quotations from his works (AE 383).

### Contemporary context

The third step in evaluating reception is to consider contemporary issues that provide not only the motive for research, but also criteria for evaluation and a guide for construction of alternative interpretation. Rowland finds that for “liberation theologians ... the test for truth is the effect it has on people’s lives” (42). Phillips and Fewell claim that “ethics serves as the horizon for making sense of criticism” (3). The various contextual approaches to biblical interpretation that have emerged recently might offer various critiques of natalism. Feminists wanting to “revalue maternal work” are also aware of potential pitfalls (Muers, “Reproduce” 165), though rarely from a demographic perspective. Given the likely consequences of higher birth rates in US subpopulations for the total US ecological footprint and its global impact, I choose an ecological approach.

A contextual interpretation must be grounded in Scripture and the Christian tradition before venturing beyond them. David Horrell advises that “to be potentially persuasive ... an ecological reading of the Bible would need to demonstrate that it offers an authentic appropriation of the Christian tradition” (“Challenge” 168). He also suggests that while it will necessarily be “innovative” ecological exegesis should be “coherent (and in dialogue) with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy” and must “learn critically from the history of interpretation” (“Introduction” 9). In the final chapter my constructive ecological interpretations will draw on parts of the Bible beyond the fruitful verses, and further *ressourcement* from classic (mostly patristic) Christian writings. Horrell argues that “ethical appropriation is necessarily a constructive endeavour, informed by the present context (including science, etc.) as well as by the traditions” (8). That chapter will also reflect on how science offers wisdom for reception of the fruitful verses, drawing on insights from demography, ecology, and recent calculations of the human ecological footprint and its impact on biodiversity, human welfare and economic sustainability.

### Conclusion

This chapter introduced the phenomenon of the reception of biblical verses by advocates of high fecundity. It defined the term “natalism” and excluded from its scope ideas that only incidentally tend to increase fecundity: in particular it explained

why opposition to contraceptives is not intrinsically natalist. It justified the project by the potential impact of natalist teachings on the US ecological footprint, considering the large audience of Protestants open to persuasion by Bible-based teachings. The project scope excluded pre-modern and secular natalism, versions found among the *Haredi*, Mormons and Amish, and traces in Catholicism and Orthodoxy, as those are unlikely to influence an Evangelical audience. It identified the primary sources for this project as writings by seventeen conservative Protestants in the USA, and it identified a secondary literature which evaluated the sources' reception of Scripture. Finally it set out a methodology for analyzing and evaluating this reception that requires all the following chapters.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of US Protestant natalism since 1985. It looks at the context of wider modern natalism, and modern US Evangelicalism. The bulk of the chapter is a detailed survey of biblical reception, and natalist arguments, in the primary sources. Chapter 3 investigates the possibility that natalist interpretation has roots in one strand of Protestantism, through a study of Martin Luther's writings set in their 16th century context. After that analysis of natalism and its historical roots, I will begin three steps leading toward an evaluation of natalism. Chapter 4 considers two dimensions of the context of OT fruitful verses. First the ancient Near Eastern historical setting with its agrarian, demographic, and political aspects. Second the canonical and theological context of the verses as part of a wider divine project for creating a holy nation. Chapter 5 sets Augustine's thoughts on reproduction and the fruitful verses in the context of 4th and early 5th century controversies, and then in *ressourcement* using them to challenge natalist arguments. Chapter 6 constructively applies an ecological hermeneutic to the verses, bringing together Christian tradition with contemporary demographic and ecological awareness.

## Chapter 2. Protestant natalism in the USA

This chapter focuses on conservative Protestant natalist biblical reception in the USA since 1985. To place that in historic and demographic context it looks at pre-modern ideas about fertility, and at early 20th century secular and Protestant natalism. It then examines my primary sources, and analyzes their reception of biblical texts. Having divided natalist interpretations and ideas into categories, the main part of the chapter presents each of those in turn.

### Historical context

History can be divided into periods before and after the fall of death and birth rates. In the pre-modern era high mortality in all age cohorts, but especially among infants, meant that a community's survival required at least five successful births from each woman on average (Bacci 156). Given that some experienced infertility, and that many mothers died prematurely (often due to pregnancy), the remainder of women had to bear rather more than five times.

I will treat separately the attitudes toward fertility of three stakeholders: parents, national rulers, and religious leaders. For parents, especially fathers, the benefit of numerous offspring was obvious: for agricultural labour, domestic service, and support in old age. Quantity was not the only criterion of reproductive success. They wanted healthy offspring able to contribute to the household economy. Also sons were preferred over daughters. Infanticide of weak or unwanted babies was common. Cultural norms operated to encourage fertility, and a natalist ideology was only likely to be articulated in situations where the levels of fecundity desired by different stakeholders diverged significantly.

Rulers had wider horizons than parents: they perceived rivalry between nations and a struggle for political existence or dominance. David Daube has demonstrated that fecundity was often advocated and occasionally promoted by laws. For example, Spartan rulers imposed financial penalties and disgrace on bachelors, and fathers of four sons or more were exempted from tax (13). The state wanted a surplus of sons for its army: Rome in 403 BC imposed a fine on old bachelors, and Plutarch ascribed this to a need to replenish military losses (18). In 102 BC a Censor spoke "On the

Need for Matrimony” to preserve the state (27). A century later emperor Augustus “penalized childless men, whether married or not, and rewarded the prolific with tax exemptions,” supposedly to save Rome from invasion (31). There was a particular worry about perpetuating the Roman aristocracy, whose members often did not see much benefit in large families, and much of the Roman natalist legislation, which used inheritance penalties, was aimed at them. In societies with a dominant class, or ethnic divides, state natalism was often aimed at a favoured group, and its flip side was a desire to limit numbers of the other sort of people, as reflected in the story of Pharaoh killing Israelite male babies (Exodus 1).

Pre-modern religions usually included some natalist ideology. Sampradayas Hinduism allowed men to divorce infertile wives (Coward 140), and one verse in the Quran commends “women who are loving and very prolific for I shall outnumber the peoples through you” (Kaufmann 122). Partly this reflected the culture, and many texts promise fertility as one of the rewards for religious loyalty. In retrospect we can see ways in which some religious rules have demographic effects, but it is unsafe to assume the motive is demographic. Where contemporary explanation (the best guide available) survives it usually points to cultic, moral or other reasons. For example, many religions forbade contraception and abortion but the common reasons given were the sanctity of life (including the seed), a father’s rights, and moral concerns about sex. Demographic effects can be incidental to rules with other motives. One also finds religious rules whose effect is in the opposite direction, reducing fertility. To disallow divorce even when one spouse is infertile reduces births because the fertile partner might otherwise remarry and continue reproduction. Similarly, to discourage widows from remarrying (as in early Christianity), or to promote *Sati*, self-immolation by young widows, in effect reduced the birth rate. Though religions did sometimes reflect the familial and national desire for fecundity, other concerns were usually more important.



### Modern natalism

After the unprecedented modern decline in mortality rates,<sup>53</sup> combined with urbanization and longer schooling which made offspring less profitable, parents had less incentive to seek a large number of children. There was now a greater difference between the goals of parents and rulers. Industrial barons' desires for plentiful (and cheap) labour should not be overlooked, but the stronger impetus came from rulers at times when they felt threatened by other nations. Episodes of natalism in France were stimulated by the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, and the peril of the Great War (Camiscioli; Barusse). Later natalism in Italy was similarly driven by nationalism. The dictator Mussolini lamented that "1929 marks the demographic collapse of the nation" (Ipsen 173), and in 1937 his Grand Council claimed that Italy's most serious challenge was the "demographic problem ... as without life there is neither youth nor military strength nor economic expansion" (178).<sup>54</sup> Mussolini's 1928 essay *Numero come forza* (strength in numbers) argued:

The birth rate is not simply an index of the progressive power of the nation ... it is also that which will distinguish the Fascist people from the other peoples of Europe as an index of vitality and the will to pass on this vitality over the centuries" (66-67).

Italy's new penal code in 1930 defined the sale of contraceptives as a "crime against the race (74). Policies rewarding mothers and providing maternal healthcare were financed by a special tax on bachelors (73). A deputy spoke to "summarize Mussolini's population policy" and called for the "condemnation of bachelorhood" and the "condemnation of barren and low fertility marriages" (87).

I turn to focus on American natalism. The birth rate began falling *circa* 1800 in the USA (Haines and Steckel 679), in a predominantly Christian society, due to parental decisions and despite denominational rules against contraception. A gap between reproductive ideals had appeared, but national leaders ignored this for some

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53. For example, in England before 1740 the mortality of infants (under one year old) was 187 per thousand, whereas by 1780-1820 it had fallen to 122 per thousand (Malanima 39).

54. In fact, though Italy's birth rate declined in the 1920s and earlier (Ipsen 183), its total population continued growing steadily because the death rate was falling faster. Presumably this growth was not fast enough for the nationalists.

decades. Eventually fear prompted a natalist reaction because fertility decline had begun at different dates and advanced at varying speeds in different nations, ethnic and religious groups, which resulted in relative differences in rates of population growth. A speech by President Roosevelt in 1903 warned “old-stock” Americans, that is Protestants from northern Europe, of “race suicide” due to low fertility. His rhetoric was prompted by the higher fertility of recent immigrants, mostly Catholics from southern Europe (May 61). Though old-stock numbers were not declining but rising in absolute terms, their relative dominance within the growing North American population was eroding demographically.

US Protestant natalism in the early decades of the 20th century reflected the nationalist, racist (or nativist), and eugenic ideas of the period. For example, the journal *Lutheran Witness* in 1905 reprinted Roosevelt’s speech (Graebner 309). Such ideas were far from uniquely American. The 1908 Lambeth Conference report on contraception lamented “a decline in the birth-rate ... most marked among the English-speaking people, once the most fertile of races.” Looking at a typical US city, with immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, these Anglican leaders observed that “two-thirds of the families belong to the native stock and one-third to foreign stocks; but of the children born two-thirds belong to the foreign stocks and only one-third to the native stock” (Davidson, *Lambeth* 399-400). The bishops warned of a “danger of deterioration whenever the race is recruited from the inferior and not from the superior stocks. There is the world-danger that the great English-speaking peoples, diminished in number ... should commit the crowning infamy of race-suicide, and so fail to fulfil that high destiny to which in the Providence of God they have been manifestly called” (Davidson, *Lambeth* 402). Natalism, driven by eugenic concerns about race, nation, and religion, was a mainstream idea among European and US Protestants in the early 20th century.

Other values that impinged on reproduction, including procreationism, were also active in Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th century. The reasons given by Protestants for their attacks on contraception mentioned sexual immorality far more often than population decline, and Protestant opponents of contraceptives were not always natalist. However the examples given above indicate that Protestants in that period did articulate natalist ideas. It would be outside the scope of my project to

explore further in that earlier period the relative roles of natalism, procreationism, and other ideas impinging on reproduction.

### **Hiatus and renaissance**

After the early decades of the 20th century natalism and procreationism among Protestants began to recede, and by mid-century there was a consensus that it was acceptable for parents to plan small families (and use contraceptives). At the level of denominational policy this was pioneered by Anglicans, at the Lambeth conference in 1930. Eventually all major denominations accepted family planning (Goodson, “Protestants” 355-56), including for example the Methodists in the UK by 1939, and 1956 in the USA, the Church of Scotland in 1944, and the Dutch Reformed Church in 1952 (Spitzer and Saylor 459). Pius XII in 1951 permitted family planning for Catholics on condition that specific methods were used. The most conservative groups, such as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS)<sup>55</sup> were slower. In a 1953 survey a quarter of LCMS laity were either unsure about or definitely opposed spacing or limiting family size by any means, even abstinence. Through a survey of the LCMS journal *Lutheran Witness*, Alan Graebner tracks a shift by the mid-1960s to near-universal acceptance of family planning (327).

By the 1960s most Evangelical leaders accepted family planning. At a symposium in 1968 sponsored by *Christianity Today* and the Christian Medical Society, 25 scholars produced a “Protestant Affirmation on the Control of Human Reproduction” which is an Evangelical consensus statement. It affirmed that “partners in marriage should have the privilege of determining the number of children they wish to have” (Spitzer and Saylor xxviii). Another section entitled “The Christian in an Over-Populated World” stated that: “control of human reproduction demands the attention of Christians from the standpoint of the desperate needs not only of individuals and families but also of nations and people. This Affirmation acknowledges the need for the discriminating involvement of Christian people in programs of population control at home and abroad” (Spitzer and Saylor xxxi). The reference to human numbers and to overpopulation indicates this was not only a

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55. Despite its name the LCMS is not confined to Missouri, but is a confederacy of Southern Lutherans. It is the ninth largest US denomination.

change in attitudes to contraception, but also a shift away from natalism toward acceptance of smaller family sizes.

From the 1950s to the early 1980s advocacy of large family size by Protestant writers was rare, brief, and usually not based on the Old Testament. John Warwick Montgomery (a Lutheran) argued in 1966 that the centre of biblical teaching on marriage is Ephesians 5:22 and because “the union of Christ and his Church does not exist for its own sake but to bring others to spiritual birth, so the marital union is properly fulfilled in natural birth.” So far that is little more than a refusal to divide unitive and procreative ends of marriage, but he adds:

The burden of proof rests, then, on the couple who wish to restrict the size of their family; to the extent possible and desirable, all Christian couples should seek to ‘bring many sons unto glory’. After all, as Charles Galton Darwin informs us, those who restrict their birth rate will ultimately be engulfed by those who do not: ‘*homo contraciens* would become extinct and would be replaced by the variety *homo progenitivus*.’ The Christian application of this principle is obvious. (Montgomery 582)

Natalist statements with an OT basis were made by Rousas Rushdoony in 1974, and by Gary North in 1982, both leaders of Reconstructionism, a movement at the edge of Evangelicalism. Of this period Charles Provan observed that “some theologians spoke out against the limiting of children by Christians until fairly recent times. And now, opposition to birth control is almost dead” (3).

By 1990 the near-consensus among Evangelicals was breached. One natalist rejoiced in 1989 that “more articles and books are coming out agreeing with the teachings of Scripture on large families” (Morecraft 9-10). Tracing this development, Patricia Goodson identifies Pride and Provan as significant advocates who gained a hearing among conservative Evangelicals. She points to an issue of *Christianity Today* magazine in 1991 which carried articles for and against family planning, as the breakthrough into the mainstream (“Protestants” 357).

Chapter 1 listed my primary sources, publications in English since 1985 in which natalism is a major theme and is supported with biblical citation and exegesis. It is appropriate to treat these as distinct from early 20th century Protestant natalism. It is a renaissance after a long hiatus, among people whose parents had small families and accepted that as the modern norm. Sproul, an influential Calvinist, confesses that “I began, like most modern evangelicals, believing that God had blessed the church

with the gift of birth control ... to limit the size of our families so we can be about His work” (Sproul 42). There are qualitative differences: most of the old ideas and biblical citations are rehearsed, but new arguments and more Scriptures are added to the natalist arsenal. Back then natalism could be found among Protestants in many European countries but now it is distinctively North American.

Some critics find in today’s natalism a revival of early 20th century racism. Miguel de la Torre observes Albert Mohler’s lament that “we are barely replenishing ourselves” and suggests that, given continuing large US natural increase, it must be “white supremacy code language” (103-05). I do not think so: in context Mohler’s odd claim arose from his failure to look at data on US births and deaths, and his misunderstanding of how fertility interacts with rising longevity and tempo effects of change in age of childbearing, which I suspect led him to assume a TFR of 2.1 is “barely replenishing” the population. In general the new natalists avoid racism, despite a few lapses. The once common phrase “race suicide” has gone, as is the old eugenics of physical fitness, and nationalism is less prominent. The natalist Allan Carlson judges these features of old Protestant natalism’s character as “problems which a pronatalist policy must avoid” in future. He regrets that Missouri Synod Lutherans supported the race suicide scare of 1905, and that “churches have also fallen back at times on the nationalist temptation” (“Fruitful” 28). He considers that for Christianity (and for other Abrahamic religions) the “nationalist and racial arguments contradict their universalist claims” and so “pronatalism is legitimate only as a consequence of their theologies: as a response to God’s command in Genesis” (“Fruitful” 29). That is the new reformed natalism.

#### **Why did Protestant natalism revive?**

Explanations of the natalist renaissance among US Evangelicals, the timing of its rebirth, and its persistence into the second decade of the twenty-first century, can only be speculative. One trend which contributed was the emergence of abortion as a moral issue for Protestants by 1980. Narratives by some women suggest a conveyor from pro-life movements into natalism (Garrison; Joyce 140). Pride argues that past acceptance of “limiting family size” was implicitly “refusing to consider children an unmitigated blessing” and led inexorably to abortion (75-77). French suggests there

can be no victory against abortion while family planning is accepted, for both are anti-life and stem from “love of self” (51, 53).

Natalism may also be regarded as a reaction to a common questioning of traditional expectations about lifestyle. Watters suggests that until recent decades Protestants have simply reproduced “on autopilot” (26), assuming that marriage should include rearing children. Articulation of arguments for (higher) reproduction is therefore a response to radical questions.

The competitive aspect of natalism is linked to perceptions of a culture war reflected in the rise of the religious right during Reagan’s presidency (1981-1989). Concerns persist about shifts in the relative sizes of different religious groups in the USA, where in 1776 over 95% of the population was Protestant. Now it is about 50% and will probably fall to 37% by 2043. The change in recent decades has been due to rises in the categories labelled Secular and Latino Catholic (Skirbekk, Kaufmann and Goujon). Immigration to the USA since 1980 has been at the highest level since the early 20th century, which coincidentally was the era of the old wave of natalism. More recently (since 2001) a different perception of Islam as a serious competitor to Evangelicalism, and a worry that the national characters of America’s allies will be changed by relatively higher Muslim fertility (the “Eurabia” scare), have exacerbated the competitive mindset of some Evangelicals.

Perception of the efficacy of endogenous growth compared to evangelism may provoke natalism. Akin and Mohler confess that studying Baptist membership data stimulated their thinking on family size (Wax). Houghton cites the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (77). In that work church growth data is tabulated under two headings: “Conversion” and “Natural” (Barrett, Kurian and Johnson). For the period from 1990 to 2000 global annual Christian increase is estimated as 2.5 million by conversion, and 22.7 million by natural means (the latter being nine times greater). The editors assume that natural increase is a factor “over which religious bodies have relatively little or no control” and that “rarely are they aware of it as a cause of their growth” (Barrett et al. 475). To the contrary, natalist writers are well aware of this factor and they believe it can and should be influenced.

## Reception of Christian Scriptures

Since the “primary object of the reception critic will be to study how the Bible actually has been understood” (Klint 91), I will give detailed attention to biblical citations in the primary natalist sources. To go beyond an impressionistic approach every quotation and citation of biblical texts in support of a natalist argument was systematically catalogued in a database. The most popular text is “be fruitful and multiply” with 23 references to Genesis 1:28, which features in all my sources.<sup>56</sup> The next most popular is Psalm 127:3-5 with 18 references. It is cited by seven of the sources. I also observe that brief online presentations of natalism which cite only one or two Bible texts usually choose one or both of these. So my thesis chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 will concentrate on these verses.

Some natalists limit reception to a few verses. Al Mohler frequently alludes to the Bible, as in a blog on “Birth Control,” but is reserved in citation. For example, his blog on “Deliberate Childlessness” refers to “His mandate revealed in the Bible,” and asserts: “The church should insist that the biblical formula calls for adulthood to mean marriage and marriage to mean children.” The only OT citation is Psalm 127. Elsewhere (“Large Families”) he writes: “In the Bible, large families are seen as a sign of God’s blessing,” but he does not specify verses. R. C. Sproul Jr. devotes a chapter to Psalm 127, and also refers to Genesis 1:28. Allan Carlson, in three articles presenting Protestant tradition as natalist, eight times either quotes “be fruitful and multiply” or cites it, and alludes once to Psalm 127, commending “those who have opened their lives to bringing a full quiver of children into the world” (“Freedom” 196; “Pronatalism” 18, 21, 26; “Children” 21, 24, 25). Dan Akin asserts that “we do have a culture mandate to be fruitful and multiply” (Wax). In his “Axioms” sermon (15) Akin rebukes the idea that “less is better” and cites Psalms 128 and 127 (and Deuteronomy 6:1-9 regarding education).

Other natalists range widely across the Bible. The number of distinct OT texts cited by each remaining writer is: 10 by Owen, 14 by Houghton, 18 by Provan, 23 by

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56. There are also ten citations of its repetition at Genesis 9:1,7 which natalists prize as an indication that the “Fall” did not terminate the imperative.

Pride, 29 by Watters, 34 by Heine, and 104 by Campbell. My sources between them refer to 157 distinct OT texts.<sup>57</sup> Psalm 128 with its image of marital fecundity, linked with material prosperity, is cited 9 times across five sources. Deuteronomy 28:4-11, which includes fecundity among the blessings Israel will receive if they are faithful to YHWH's commandments, is cited 7 times. Genesis 35:1-12, the Onan narrative, is cited 6 times but only by procreationists. There are four texts which appear 4 times: Deuteronomy 7:13-14 offers a similar lesson to chapter 28, but adds: "There shall not be male or female barren among you" (ESV);<sup>58</sup> Jeremiah 29:4-6 urges those exiled in Babylon (received as relevant to Christians amid secularism) to marry and increase; Psalm 112:2 is favoured by those linking fecundity and prosperity; and Malachi 2:15 is cited by particular natalists. Five texts appear three times: a blessing of Abraham (Genesis 17:2); the blessing of Rebekah (24:60); a promise that "none shall miscarry or be barren" (Exodus 23:26); a prophecy of "more children" (Isaiah 54:1, NLT); and the value of a large population (Proverbs 14:28). Of the remainder, 29 texts feature just twice, and 109 texts only once.

Counting all citations in contexts of natalist argument across the catalogued sources, Old Testament references are four times more frequent than New Testament references. When compared to the relative sizes of the two Testaments, a ratio of 3.7 to 1, this suggests a usage which is nearly proportionate. That was a surprising result for me as after initial reading of the sources I had judged that natalism was mostly based on the Old Testament, except perhaps for 1 Timothy 2:15 and 5:14. It shows the methodological value of systematic data analysis, which indicates that 42 distinct verse-ranges are cited from thirteen New Testament books. It is however beyond the

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57. As explained in the Appendix, citations of overlapped verse-ranges, for example 3-5 and 4-5, are merged for the purpose of counting distinct texts, and only count once.

58. The imperative connotation in English is accidental.



scope of my thesis to consider natalist use of the New Testament, except where it is cited to justify their use of the Old Testament.<sup>59</sup>

Natalists defend their application of OT verses to Christianity. Provan is aware that “some may think that we quote the Old Testament too much,” and in response he observes the New Testament has “1600 references” to the Old Testament, and that “Paul gets his rules on sexual matters right out of the Mosaic Law” (3). Sproul cites Matthew 5:18 for his claim that OT ordinances are not abolished for Christians (8). The dispensational distance between the OT and Christianity is discussed by the writers, and some minimize this. Campbell argues that in general the “truths ... in Genesis are never altered throughout the rest of the Bible, only enlarged upon” for we do not have “a God who changes His mind halfway through His written word” (22, 116). Though most admit that some details of instructions elsewhere in the OT are inappropriate for Christians, and that direct application is not always appropriate, they claim that paradigmatic biblical principles are unchanging and that marital fruitfulness is one of those principles.

Many natalists acknowledge the New Testament presents a spiritual conception of fruitfulness, children, and family. Watters admits a NT shift in emphasis, as the “focus on physical children and physical fruitfulness prior to the coming of Christ gives way to spiritual fruitfulness,” but also argues that “Christ’s coming” did not “undo the marital design for physical children” or “nullify the call to be fruitful and multiply” (40). The imperative to biological fruitfulness therefore continues in parallel with the spiritual. Campbell comments on John 15:16 that “God longs for fruitfulness and increase in the natural and in the spiritual sense” (33, 48). This principle of physical fruitfulness continuing alongside rather than being superseded by a NT spiritual understanding enables natalists to use many NT verses, but it is dependent on the foundation of their OT reception.

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59. Much of the natalist exegesis of the New Testament depends on ideas derived originally from the Old Testament. For example, identifying refusal to reproduce as an aspect of the root sin in Romans 1:26 where “females exchanged the natural function for that which is against nature” depends on arguments from Genesis 1-3 about the natural order of creation.

All affirm the Bible is inerrant as a guide for conduct. It is “profitable for life” (Sproul 7). Scripture “tells us how to live” so “we must follow His instructions” (Owen 29). They differ as to how it directs behaviour today. Chronological and cultural distance between ancient and modern worlds is acknowledged but all conclude that fertility is an enduring principle. Andrews refutes “those who say the Bible was written long ago to ancient agrarian people in a patriarchal society ... [and] cannot be applied literally today” (361). He allows that applications may vary but insists that “moral standards are timeless” (362). Heine sees enduring relevance in the “Hebrew family model” (83). Most natalists admit that children were more economically beneficial in pre-modern cultures than in US cities today, though Campbell opposes this contrast by pointing to God’s parallel promises (Deuteronomy 28:2-4) of fertility “in the city” as well as “in the field” (44; also in Houghton 35). Heine explicitly bridges the gap between ancient and modern, urging that “Christian couples should treasure their OT heritage ... that prizes fertility for the perpetuation of family name” (84). Scholars describing OT thought are quoted within discussions of modern application. Heine quotes Pedersen’s comments on Psalm 127 which affirm “the satisfaction and permanence of building a posterity” and his warning that “to fail to have children, therefore, is the destruction of the house” and therefore “he who has no progeny labours in vain” (72).

### **Appeals to tradition**

Natalist appeals to authority are mostly to the Bible, but also to tradition. When the interpretation of Scripture is disputed, Protestant tradition becomes important. The figure most often cited is Martin Luther, in support of various arguments, and chapter 3 will focus on natalist appropriation of Luther as a case study of their use of tradition. Elsewhere in Protestant tradition, natalists find support for the ancillary argument that (home) economics should not constrain family size. Campbell quotes Matthew Henry (1662-1714), who assured his readers that “He that sends mouths will send meat” (136). Hess quotes Adam Clarke, a Puritan theologian (1760-1832), who reasoned that since “God gives children” therefore also “he will feed them ... supporting them by a chain of miraculous providences” (82). Pride quotes John Kitto (1804-1854), an Anglican missionary, who rebuked those who do “not trust God to pay us well for the board and lodging of all the little ones He has committed to our

charge” (36). For the indirectly natalist idea that marriage should not be intentionally childless, Mohler cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer (“Revisited”).

Quotations from other Protestants are largely confined to unlimited arguments against contraception, which is peripheral to natalism. In this connection Campbell quotes two early 20th century Lutherans: Walter Maier, and F. H. Knubel, the President of the United Lutheran Church (157). Provan also quotes from many Protestants but most are concerned with immorality rather than demographics, except for two Lutherans. John Fritz (1874-1953), the Dean of Concordia Seminary, in his 1934 work *Pastoral Theology* judges that “the one-, two-, or three children family system is contrary to the Scriptures; for man has no right arbitrarily or definitely to limit the number of his offspring ... Gen.1:28; Ps.127:3-6; Ps.128:3-4” (Provan 71). Theodore Laetsch (1877-1962) offers as one among many arguments against family planning a claim that “it undermines the State. It is race suicide” and therefore “at least four children to a family” are required (Provan 78-79).

Early and medieval Christian writers are cited far less. Augustine appears in Houghton (55), and Clement of Alexandria in French (32), but only for the topic of contraception. More generally, Pride assumes that “through all ages of the church ... believers ... were happily having as many children as God gave them” (59). Campbell points to “traditional wedding vows” according to which marriage is “ordained for the increase of mankind” (13), and Watters cites Anglican liturgy in support of arguments about the order of creation (38).

Secular tradition also is occasionally cited. Watters, arguing that marriage’s purpose is reproductive cites the derivation of the Latin word *matrimonium* from motherhood (38). In support of the idea of “natural function” Campbell claims that the word woman derives from “womb-man” (105).<sup>60</sup> That etymology is considered relevant implies a claim that pre-modern people understood (divinely created) human nature better than modern liberal Americans. Heine notes approvingly that “history records many examples of pro-natalist government policies” (220). Owen observes that “until recently the world was for the most part pro-fertility” and he cites ancient Persia, China, and the Celts as examples. He claims that modern secular humanism

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60. That is wrong: it derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wifman*.

and a “control mentality” led to low fertility (Owen 16-17). The perceived pedigree of family planning is significant: Heine suggests it “was pioneered by humanists” (111). Provan claims that family planning did not begin in churches but among “pagans like Margaret Sanger” (39).<sup>61</sup>

## **Contours of Protestant natalism**

Here I present natalist interpretation and argument with pointers to my critique in subsequent chapters where evaluation is done from the perspectives of original Near Eastern context, classic Christian tradition, and ecological hermeneutics. This chapter is descriptive and only provides immediate critique for points that are not treated in subsequent chapters, or where an idea can be rebutted very briefly. In those instances the counter-argument will be clearly indicated as my own view, whereas normally in this chapter it should be assumed that the views expressed are not mine and my silence does not imply agreement with natalism.

In the first chapter I distinguished between those natalists who also adhere to the separate ideology of procreationism and those who do not. This corresponds to the distinction suggested by Doriani between unlimited and large-but-limited views about family size.<sup>62</sup> I categorize my primary sources accordingly, and one matter I investigate in this chapter is differences and similarities in biblical reception and argument between the two categories. Natalists who allow family planning distance themselves from those who do not. For example Mohler in a 2004 blog on “Birth Control” advises: “Christian couples are not ordered by Scripture to maximize the largest number of children that could be conceived.”

### **Large or unlimited, but not maximized**

Even in the unlimited camp, none of my sources advocates a pure natalism that aims to maximize fertility. The hypothetical maximum average fertility is 15.3 (Bongaarts and Potter 92), but that requires the removal of all moral and physical

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61. Historically this is false. Margaret Sanger began campaigning in 1914, whereas family limitation was common in the USA decades earlier, in a largely Christian population.

62. Doriani places his own view in the large-but-limited camp, though he goes no further than urging “at least two, if possible” and “as many as the fabric of our life allows” (33) so he is a mild natalist. His primary motive is pastoral criticism of the unlimited ideology.

constraints. No natalist writer seeks maximal fertility. For example, none (unlike in early Judaism) requires spouses with an infertile partner to divorce and remarry. None condemns breastfeeding (which suppresses fertility) and some commend it. None calls for the legal minimum age at marriage to be lowered, and some set a higher minimum.<sup>63</sup> None prohibits singleness. Many reject IVF and other fertility treatments. None advises that a fetus predicted to be unlikely to survive should be aborted quickly to make room for a fresh pregnancy (cf. Joyce 143). Some favour home births, and a few disdain interventions by gynaecologists (Joyce 164), which may slightly increase natal mortality and so reduce fertility. Clearly other agenda also move these writers, and while some ideas complement natalism others constrain fecundity. These impinging issues include affirmation of lifelong monogamy, fetal status and rights, agrarianism, a preference for whatever is natural, and acceptance of some modern individualistic ideals.

Advocates of unlimited fertility use the slogan “let God plan your family” and reject the labels unlimited and unplanned since they argue that God plans and limits their family size by direct intervention. The labels should be taken to mean that they oppose human planning by parents. French replaces the label Quiverfull with a term Quiverx based on the use of  $x$  in algebra for unknown quantities because “we don’t know how many children we will have” (xi). That may be true when “we” refers to one couple, but in aggregate the number of children born to each woman practising unlimited fertility is statistically distributed, and the birth rate is predictable. There have been no demographic studies confined to US unlimited natalists. The many studies of pre-modern examples approximating to “natural fertility” come from various cultures. Amish and Hutterite data from the early 20th century is nearest to our case,<sup>64</sup> as their fertility was not limited by contraception but was constrained by Christian norms for marriage and morality, and their maternal and prenatal mortality

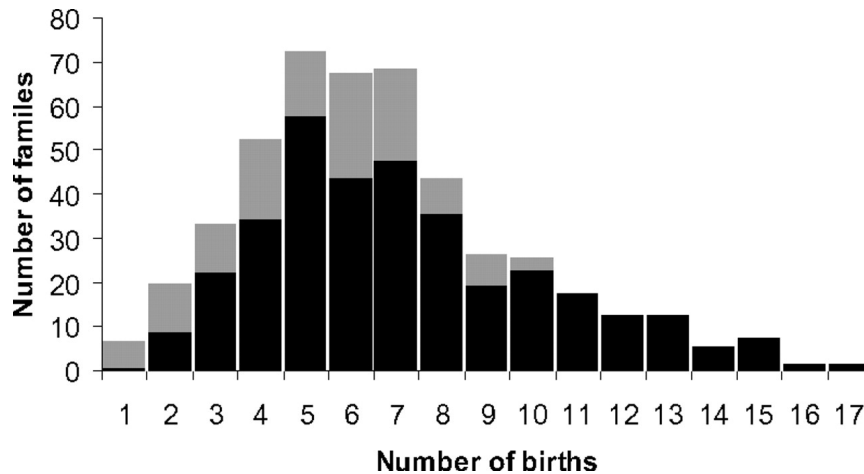
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63. For example, in a 2008 episode of reality TV series “17 Kids and Counting” the Keller family rule that a daughter must be aged 20 before marriage (Mesaros-Winckles 13).

64. By the mid-20th century Hutterites and Amish began slightly reducing their fertility, so later data is not quite as useful a guide to Quiverfull outcomes (K.J.C. White).

was closer to modernity than to premodern levels. Amish women born in the first quarter of the 20th century had a TFR around 7.7 (Greksa 195).

Family size of 465 Hutterite couples *circa* 2007



This graph (Kosova, Abney and Ober 1773) on which black bars show completed families (n=353) and grey bars show incomplete families (n=112) is based on more recent Hutterite data, after they had begun limiting and reducing fertility, so the average Quiverfull family size is probably slightly larger. The data suggest that a completed family size of 1 or 2 is predictably rare, and most couples will have between four and eight children.

The fecundity of adherents of the unlimited approach arguably does not prove that have a natalist motive. French argues “the goal is not to have large families, though we acknowledge that a large family can often be the result” (16). They claim to have turned decision-making over to God, however to be sexually active (without using contraception) is a decision. More tellingly, each of the writers claiming to be neutral with regard to family size, elsewhere in their writing also deploys explicitly natalist arguments in favour of large numbers of children, as will be evident later in this chapter.

### How many children?

The advocacy of large or larger family size is natalist regardless of whether or not a particular number or range of numbers is specified. Pride, Owen, and Watters never mention numbers. French advises that having, for example, nine children is not “more sanctified” than one and “no family size is better than any other” on condition that parents are letting God plan their family (16). In other writers one can discern

varying expectations about family size. Some are ambivalent, in one place distancing themselves from numerical advocacy, but elsewhere mentioning a range of family sizes which they clearly regard as desirable.

A small family size with just one or two children is disapproved of by some natalist writers. Provan discerns that “God views childlessness or less children than possible as a negative occurrence, something which he uses as a punishment” (9). Houghton considers that Canada’s birth rate at 1.5 represents “being unfruitful and subtracting” (28).<sup>65</sup> Campbell cites Psalm 107:38 for her argument that “one or two sheep is not a flock. God wants our families to be like a flock” (41). She laments that “many have stopped at two or three children” (83), and that extension of the range deemed too small goes further than other writers.

Many unlimited advocates do commend a large family size, or favourably mention particular numbers. Hess rebukes those who “will not trust God. They may opt to be moderately fruitful and add instead of multiply” (123). Campbell cites John 15:2 “bear more fruit,” and applies this to reproduction, discerning that “God is not satisfied with average fruitfulness” (48). In the multi-generational extrapolations of future growth which some writers present, the numbers chosen as a typical family size to use in the calculations are six (Pride 80; Hess 170), seven (Sproul 51), and eight (Hess 175). These are not accidental figures: they are (as illustrated by the histogram above) roughly the median number expected with unlimited fertility and modern low infant mortality. Also the family sizes of OT characters are esteemed as models. Under a heading “the more the better,” Provan points to the fourteen sons and three daughters of Heman (1 Chronicles 25:4), the eight sons of Obed-Edom (1 Chronicles 26:4-5), and the biblical remark that “God blessed him” (7). Houghton refers to those verses, and also to 1 Samuel 1:8 which he suggests indicates that “ten sons is a standard of great blessing” (33, 32).

Unlimited natalists combat an oral tradition among (other) Evangelicals that ancient quivers held only a few arrows. Provan (8) opposes those who deem “three or

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65. In fact, despite having a TFR below 2, Canada has more births than deaths each year. For example, in 2006/7 there were 360,900 births and 233,800 deaths (Statistics Canada), which *contra* Houghton is “adding” rather than “subtracting.” This illustrates a common misuse or misunderstanding of TFR and the concept of replacement fertility.

five” a quiverfull. This idea apparently derives from ancient art, and Hess argues (correctly I think) that the artists simplified reality, and points to archaeological evidence for 12-15 arrows in a quiver, in order to refute the “mythical six-child maximum” (31). Though this might aim at demolishing an arbitrary limit rather than commending larger numbers, elsewhere the sources go further. Campbell argues “we are in a war today and God needs arrows for His army ... When a warrior went out to war how many arrows would he want in his quiver? ... He’d want to squeeze in as many as he could” (79). These arguments seem to be aimed at other Christians (perhaps limited natalists) who read Psalm 127 in a similar way but seek to justify ceasing from reproduction after a certain number. In addition the popularity in the unlimited camp of the label Quiverfull, with its numerical connotation, is suggestive of natalism being present alongside other values.

Advocates of limited (or ordinary) natalism rarely specify particular numbers but do present ideals about family size, and occasionally mention a typical number or desirable range. Beisner judges it “difficult to reconcile the present preference for small families—usually not more than two children per couple—with this Biblical view of children” as blessings (*Garden* 182). Akin laments “we have bought into the mindset of the modern world in that we think that less children is ... better” and he urges “pastors” to “point out that Psalm 128 talks about the beautiful gift ... God blesses the one who has a large number of them.” He suggests “if you have one child as opposed to four, five or six, then you have a much smaller initial mission field” (Wax). They accept the number will and should vary depending on individual circumstances, but nevertheless do recommend that couples aim for larger families than the contemporary US average.

There has been criticism of natalist exaltation of numbers. A Baptist historian considers that Mohler’s teaching “sounds like thinly-veiled Mormon theology, in which large families are a sign of godliness and ... part of the salvation equation” (Gourley). Also, narratives in Joyce testify to negative emotions among adherents who fail to achieve high fecundity (180, 207). This highlights a problem in natalist practice, but natalist writers rarely claim that high fecundity is evidence of divine approval, though Nancy Campbell does suggest that “God shows respect to us by multiplying us” (35). Houghton warns his over-enthusiastic readers that we cannot



“ascertain the degree to which God has blessed a family by simply counting the number of children” (84). Sproul similarly makes clear “this does not mean that one can measure the level of favor one has with God by the number” of children (49). Natalist practice may have this tendency if, by analogy with a crude version of the Protestant work ethic, children are evidence of one’s character and election. Natalists however can reasonably respond that these are merely abuses which are inevitable among fallible human adherents.

### **Universal or ecclesiastical?**

Who is called to high fecundity: is it particularly for Christians or also for people of other religions? Natalists are divided on this question. Carlson consistently advocates universal application. Though his arguments are mostly social he includes exegesis of texts from Genesis 1-11 and he points out the “admonition” to multiply “occurred well before” anyone began to “call on the name of the Lord” (4:26) and Genesis “shows the family as pre-existing the church” (Carlson and Mero 86). This blessing is Adamic and he claims it was not lost or superseded by the Abrahamic blessing or any later covenant. I call this “universal” natalism.

For some writers the blessings are not oriented to reproduction by unbelievers, but are for Christians bearing godly offspring. Pride (63) is the clearest advocate of what I call “particular” natalism: “Scripture draws a fundamental distinction between the children of the righteous (of whom there are never enough) and the children of the wicked (of whom there are always too many).” Heine similarly asks “is it the church or the Hindus who have inherited God’s promises to Adam and Abraham to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth?” That is a rhetorical question; he claims for the church both the Adamic and Abrahamic blessings. Heine warns about Muslim fertility, writing that “Christianity’s biggest competitors have no qualms about bedroom-based growth programs” (29). For these writers, exhortation to high fertility is aimed at Christians.

Many of the writers do not explicitly confine the scope of natalist exhortation to Christians. I turn to implicit evidence, for example Provan qualifies his slogan “the more children the better” in another place as “the more children a believing couple has, the better” (8). Others address Christians and refer only to Christian fecundity. A test would be to ask them whether they want higher Muslim fecundity. Akin worries

about the relative difference in birth rates between religious and ethnic groups in Europe and warns that “Muslims will simply, by a natural process, outnumber the white Europeans” (Wax). Leaving aside Akin’s confusion of religion and ethnicity, this suggests that his natalism is not universal. In most of the natalist sources the focus is on reproduction by Christians.

A sectarian motive is implied where one argument for natalism is competitive advantage. Hess quotes Psalm 105:24 where God “caused His people to be very fruitful, and made them stronger than their adversaries” and portrays fecundity as a path for Christianity to gain political power in the USA (177). Pride estimates the number of genuine Christians and then calculates that if every such family in the US had six children while other families had only one, the nation would soon become predominantly Christian (80). The imagined other in the USA are secular liberals, but globally there are different others to compete with demographically. Campbell claims Muslims are “the fastest growing religion in the world through their birth rate” and urges a “vision to invade the earth with mighty sons and daughters” (197). French anticipates that “we will be able to overwhelm the enemy by sheer numbers” (56). All such hopes depend on Christian fecundity being persistently greater than others’ fecundity, and suggest particular (sectarian) natalism.

### **Survey of Bible-based arguments**

The most basic natalist argument is that “children are an unmitigated blessing from God” (Heine 57), and therefore parents should welcome additional offspring. Doug Philips asks rhetorically whether “children cease to be a blessing after a certain number” (Houghton xv). Provan has a clear answer, that “children are a blessing from God: the more the better” (7). Heine more carefully states: “In a general sense ... the more children, the bigger the blessing” (230). The argument by critics that “be fruitful and multiply” is not a command but a blessing, fails to counter this central biblical basis of both limited and unlimited natalism.

Sproul argues that to be genuine blessings additional offspring must be of real benefit to parents: “We do not begrudgingly leave the size of our family in God’s hand because he says children are a reward and it would be insulting ... to say ‘No thank you.’ Rather ... they are actual blessings” (48). Natalists identify the various

ways in which offspring convey extrinsic benefits to their family, the church, and nation. Other natalist arguments consider duties of parenthood, deriving from God's commands, His purposes, and the order of created nature.

### **Blessing to families**

Children are a tangible blessing in various ways. Campbell advises that "children bring joy" citing Luke 1:17, and asks parents "would you like to have more joy and happiness?" (71). The idea is a simple equation of additional children and additional joy for parents. There is also an idea that children benefit from having many siblings. French claims that in large families children "have many more opportunities to learn to share" (91). Bayly suggests the modern "decrease in the size of our families" may be hindering children's "moral development" (15). Campbell reads "lonely" in Psalm 68:6 as "only child" and concludes that "he will bless an only child by giving them a family" (41). This draws upon a Western stereotype of the maladjusted only child, which is challenged by Bill McKibben who traces the history of that myth, which began in the USA in the 1890s, and presents evidence that only children are not less sociable or more selfish (20-45).

Additional offspring are a benefit since "older children ... can be of great assistance ... in a variety of chores" (Houghton 80), contributing in domestic and other labour. Campbell cites Jeremiah 10:20 "my children have gone from me, and they are not; there is no one to spread my tent again and to set up my curtains" claiming that "the more children we have the more help we have around the home" and she describes a local mother of nineteen children who has ten still at home: "she trained them well and confesses that she now lives like a Queen" (74). An important subset of these arguments concern the help children give to elderly parents. Heine cites a verse identifying a baby as the "nourisher of your old age" (Ruth 4:15), and claims "grown-up children ... still can be today the best insurance available" as they "provide housing, food, fellowship and basic care" for elderly parents (232). Mohler similarly warns those with few or no children that they are likely to suffer when old ("Population"). The underlying idea is that old people should be cared for by their

biological offspring, and as some children may fail to live up to that obligation it is safer for parents to have a larger number.<sup>66</sup>

Continuity of lineage is presented as another benefit. Campbell says Psalm 128:6 indicates parents have a duty to not “deprive our parents of their reward and glory in their old age ... grandchildren” (202). Heine observes that “grandchildren are the crown of the aged” (Proverbs 17:6) and he urges parents to try hard to provide them (230). A variant argument concerns the perpetuation of the family name which implies a requirement for male descendants. Heine says a “family name can signify a personalized embodiment of God’s physical and spiritual blessings” and he cites the Levirate law (Deuteronomy 25:6) designed to save a man’s family name. He does not suggest anyone follow the law but rather uses it paradigmatically to argue for the importance of paternal lineage (76-79). Campbell cites Isaiah 66:22 to show that “it is important to have children to carry on the family name” as it “guarantees the future” and “family lineage” (93). She observes that “it is not as easy as you would think ... it took fifteen grandchildren before we got one to carry on the family name!” (97).<sup>67</sup> This can be regarded as a benefit not just for parents but also for the whole line of ancestors.

A step beyond genetic perpetuation is aggrandizement of the (natural) family. Campbell advises that the OT word “house” can refer to this lineage and women “built up the house” (Ruth 4:11) by reproducing (91). Philip Lancaster, editor of *Patriarch* magazine, urges that “each man should aim to be the founder of a dynasty for God” (Campbell 93). Doug Phillips predicts that “men who father many ... will preside over a dynasty of thousands in four generations” (Kaufmann 95). Geoffrey Botkin (also of Vision Forum) forecasts that he will be the “patriarch of 186,000 male descendants within two centuries” and, in an echo of the blessing of Rebekah

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66. The idea that each person needs their own children to care for them in old age has never been generally applicable, not least because more than 10% of pre-modern marriages were infertile. Spreading responsibility among a wider kin or social group was essential in providing care for elderly people. The New Testament affirms a wider vision, for example in Jesus entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple (John 19:26), and in the church’s care for widows (Acts 6:1; James 1:27). The modern welfare state universalizes this.

67. Campbell’s experience illustrates why a concern for family name, in effect a son preference, has large demographic consequences.

(Genesis 24:60), Botkin reports praying over his newborn daughter that she will be the “future mother of tens of millions” (95). There could be significant demographic consequences even if only a few members of a church emulated these Christian leaders’ visions of establishing paternal dynasties.

### **Building the church**

The addition of new members to the church is, all the writers presumably would agree, the Holy Spirit’s work, but one can distinguish between two modes: conversion of those reared outside the church, and retention of those reared inside. The latter mode is called natural or endogenous growth (Kaufmann 5). Natalists emphasize its role in church growth, and proclaim the latter mode as a duty for Christians. Bayly suggests that “bearing and raising of children, then, may well be the most neglected method of evangelism today” (15). Samuel Owen dissents but is ambivalent: he observes some arguing that “we should have as many children as we can so as to Christianize the world” and he rejects this as an unworthy motive (71), but subsequently he suggests that reproduction has “vital and long-range implications for the church” and “will strengthen the corporate body” (128).

The case for endogenous growth depends on a belief that most offspring will persevere in adult membership. “God does not promise that all of our children will be Christians, but we see Him working that way very often in families” (Hess 170). Some writers give an impression that the offspring of Christians have a spiritual status different from other babies (Pride 21), as in the claim that “we are able to ... reproduce spiritual children biologically” (Watters 41). However the normal basis of the premise is parental responsibility for religious training. Wilson, Doriani, Watters, and Houghton all cite the verse “what was God seeking? Godly offspring” (Malachi 2:15), and Owen cites Proverbs 22:6 “train up a child in the way he should go” (88). The revival of Protestant natalism began inside the homeschool movement of which Pride was a founder; she also edits *Practical Homeschooling* magazine. Many of the natalist writers are homeschoolers: for example the French family homeschooled seven children, and Houghton taught nine.

Some extend a picture of potential growth generations into the future. Hess imagines a church where each couple has eight children and, allowing for one in eight being called to singleness, calculates that such a church could increase “from

40 to 12,890 in three generations” (175). If this model of church growth were adopted across America then “we would be part of a replay of Exodus 1:7” (171). Houghton draws a similar picture but adds this condition: it will only happen if “example and teaching are passed along” (76). Calculations of multi-generational exponential growth depend on the practice of high fertility being emulated by the next and following generations.

Growth by conversion is implicitly discounted by natalists. “If the Christian birthrate matches that of secular society, every year the numerical gap between believers and unbelievers will increase. Every year our influence will dwindle” laments Hess (166). This assumes that the number of children who in adulthood choose to not join any church will be greater than the number of converts from those born outside. Although that is currently true among conservative Protestants,<sup>68</sup> to assume it as a long-term condition of the church suggests a low estimate of evangelism. Campbell observes that “some Christian couples ... do not want children” and warns that if all of them “took this attitude, Christianity would be wiped from the earth. It is our children who carry on God’s word” (37). This supposes a complete persistent absence of any conversions from among children born to non-Christian parents.

Endogenous growth also, it is argued, increases the probability of producing an epoch-changing reformer or revivalist. Heine cites the prophecy (from Isaiah 49:1-6) that “he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away ... who formed me from the womb to be his servant ... as a light for the nations” (115). The original promise was specific to David’s lineage, so this application of messianic verses to modern natalists’ children is illegitimate. Transformed from messianic to merely heroic this becomes a goal for every parent. French admits that “I am expecting a lot from my children” (60). The argument that natalism increases the probability of a hero emerging is theologically strange because the power who creates reformers and evangelists, the Holy Spirit, can presumably transform a convert born outside the church as easily as someone born to Christian parents.

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68. XXX though not for moderate Protestants, who attract outsiders more ref. Kaufmann...

The evangelistic mode depends on the endogenous mode. The “most obvious way to raise more missionaries is to raise more godly children” (Hess 173) and therefore “by having more children” we are “contributing to world evangelism” (Hess 169). Again a mechanistic assumption lies behind this idea: that a constant percentage of offspring will become missionaries. A more radical argument is that parenthood itself is a mode of evangelism. Pride draws a comparison between two modes: “Missionaries go to foreign countries to beget new Christians; mothers get pregnant to beget new Christians” (57). She describes the latter mode as “maternal missionary work” and rebukes women with few or no children for “giving up our God-given role as the greatest evangelists” (81). Hess imagines attending a church missionary meeting where “you may hear” the classic threefold call: “you can pray; you can give; you can go!” He suggests one might “stand up and boldly say ‘And you can reproduce!’ ” (174). In churches whose ecclesiology does not encourage women to be designated as evangelists or apostles this portrayal of fecundity as evangelism makes it an alternative form of ministry.

### **Building the nation**

Citizens have a duty to maintain and increase the nation by reproduction. The wisdom of Proverbs 14:28 that “without people a prince is ruined” (NIV) is cited by Pride (60). It may seem an unreasonable concern in the USA, which has substantial increase in population each year, but the worry is relative size, by comparison with other nations. Campbell notes that in 1950 the “industrial democracies” constituted 22% of world population but “if trends continue ... we will only be 5% by 2100” and she warns from Proverbs 14:28 (NLT) that “a dwindling nation is his doom” (197). Houghton cites the same verse to support his claim that “there needs to be a growing population, otherwise destruction looms” (34). Some also worry about America’s allies being less fecund than their enemies. Heine claims that those nations which “embody Western values are not replacing their own stock” which is ominous for “American strength and influence” (28).

The other half of the verse is also significant for natalists, “a large population is a king’s glory” (NIV) being quoted by Pride (60), while Campbell uses the NLT version which instead of “large” substitutes the word “growing” (197). This “king’s glory” is interpreted in two ways. By democratic transfer it becomes an attribute of

the nation, which is strengthened by a large population. Campbell notes that Israel in the time of Solomon were “as many as the sand by the sea” (1 Kings 4:20-34), observes they were prosperous and “dwelt safely.” She then points to a verse which tells us Israel had 12,000 cavalry (Campbell 29). Alternatively, the “king” can be read as God. Campbell points to Isaiah 26:15, which reports “you have increased the nation, O Lord ... you are glorified” and argues that a godly nation’s rising population brings glory to God’s name (44).

There is ambiguity about the referent of “nation.” In natalist writings it usually refers straightforwardly to the nation, in this case the USA, but sometimes it is not clear whether it is intended literally or as a metaphor for the church, or both. For example, when French writes that “God gives us our children for a reason” to build “a righteous nation that will not falter in the face of enemy activity” (14), and then refers to “our nation” it probably refers to the USA.

Natalists use military language but the context often suggests this probably refers to spiritual warfare, or nonviolent political conflict. For example, “we have many enemies in the gates of our nation ... Where are the arrows to combat these enemies?” (Campbell 81). Sometimes it is ambiguous. Heine is the only writer to explicitly find contemporary military significance in the metaphor of Psalm 127. He observes that arrows were weapons: “They killed enemies.” He links them to both spiritual and literal warfare: “Is this to say we should reckon children as budding soldiers? Yes, but not merely in the military sense,” because they are also spiritual warriors. Heine rejects the idea that numbers are not decisive in technological warfare by arguing that “nuclear weapons may threaten and deter, but it is warm bodies who perform the bread and butter of maintaining bases, fleets, and reserve units” (231). This is unusual: none of my other primary sources explicitly point to military might as a benefit of natalism. However given their hermeneutic insistence that material meanings of promises remain true, persisting in parallel with spiritual meanings, the former interpretation is not ruled out.

### **Population growth benefits the economy**

Alongside the role of fertility in national survival, glory, security and defence, another blessing equally national and material is economic. Natalists observe that fecundity and national prosperity are associated in Scripture, and see a causal link



then and now. Campbell asserts that “a growing population is necessary for a successful economic climate” and she finds that “the Bible links these two factors together” (30). She quotes the Living Bible version of Isaiah 29:23 “when they see the surging birth rate and the expanding economy, then they will fear and rejoice in my name.” The link expressed in that paraphrase is not apparent in any reputable scholarly translation.<sup>69</sup> Pride cites Proverbs 14:28 and claims that in the USA “centuries of healthy population growth have brought us a better standard of living” (60). Some argue that modern economic systems rely on a persistent population growth and this confirms the latter is God’s design. Heine finds that one of the ways in which fecundity is a real blessing is that it is a “blessing to the free market” (27). “When population growth is stagnant ... it undermines the entire economy” explains Heine, and he warns the “growth constant that has fueled the dynamo of capitalism will be gone” if birth rates fail to rise (213).

This aspect of natalism has affinities with secular neoliberal economics. In particular, cornucopian ideology claims that population can grow indefinitely.<sup>70</sup> A leading theorist was Julian Simon, whose central argument was that the “ultimate resource” is human ingenuity which overcomes any constraint in material resources, and so moderate population growth assists economic growth and is sustainable.<sup>71</sup> Simon argued: “We now have ... the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years” (Myers and Simon 165). One idea is that more people means more inventive genius to overcome ecological constraints. French offers this as a reason for seeking to bear additional offspring

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69. The Living Bible is a paraphrase by Ken Taylor, the founder of Tyndale House publishing company. In the early 1970s it was the best-selling book in the USA. It was revised in 1996 as the New Living Translation, which expunges Taylor’s more idiosyncratic translations, including this one.

70. The term cornucopia derives from the Latin for the horn of plenty owned by Amalthea, a goat-like Greek goddess who suckled the infant Zeus.

71. Simon (1932-1998) developed cornucopian theory in *The Economics of Population Growth* (Princeton University Press, 1977); *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton University Press, 1981); *The Resourceful Earth* (New York: Blackwell, 1984); and in *Scarcity or Abundance? A Debate on the Environment with Norman Myers* (New York: Norton, 1994). He was Professor of Business at the University of Maryland.

(85): “What if the Lord ... gives you a future great scientist who finds a clean burning fuel that will help clear pollution?”

Calvin Beisner,<sup>72</sup> who was one of Julian Simon’s students, provides the most systematic exposition of biblical arguments for the belief that population growth stimulates economic growth. Beisner’s cornucopian idea is based on a particular construal of the image of God. He notes concerns that population growth multiplies pollution and resource use, but discerns the “vision of humankind that underlies these two concerns” is that “humankind is principally a consumer” whereas “the Bible gives us a very different vision of humankind” (*Garden* 177). His first step is to identify creativity as an aspect of imaging God. His next step is to claim that this “different vision begets a different prediction: that people, because God made them in His image to be creative and productive” make “more resources than we consume” (*Garden* 183). Therefore “continued population growth will result not in the depletion but in the increased abundance of resources” (*Garden* 190). So increased fecundity is beneficial. “Ordinarily, Christians should welcome, not try to avoid, additional children” argues Beisner (*Garden* 182).

Beisner as a Calvinist has to wrestle with an ancillary point: for his vision of the image as beneficial creativity to be economically relevant it must be universal, or at least common and not limited to the elect.<sup>73</sup> He accepts Calvin’s belief that the image at the Fall was mostly effaced, but finds a solution in widening Christ’s restoration of the image beyond the elect. “Environmentalists assume that people are principally consumers and polluters; Biblical Christians assume that people are principally intelligent, well-meaning, creative producers and stewards, because that is what God made them to be and what He has been transforming them to be through the redeeming work of Christ” (*Garden* 196). In a defensive footnote he clarifies that he is not teaching universalism, but instead making a distinction between salvation

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72. Calvin Beisner is Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Social Ethics at Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. His doctorate (in Scottish history) is from the University of St Andrew’s.

73. Beisner is “a ruling elder of the Presbyterian Church in America” (PCA) <[www.ecalvinbeisner.com](http://www.ecalvinbeisner.com)>. The PCA is a conservative splinter from mainstream US Presbyterianism.

(for the elect) and the restoration of Christ's image (for the many). I suspect that this distinction would not be acceptable to Calvin. By contrast, Doug Wilson, another natalist writer, avoids making the transformation universal for although he repeats the cornucopian mantra he qualifies its scope: "when we are obedient to God, we produce more than we consume" (Wilson 123). Many natalists regard fecundity as contributing positively to national economic prosperity and see this as one way in which it is a real blessing.

### **Divine command**

Moving on from the arguments above that additional offspring are extrinsic benefits, other reasons for natalism concern obligations to God. The imperative form of the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" is taken to indicate the divine will for every married couple to seek offspring. Various terms are used to describe this: command, instruction, order, mandate, ordinance, and call. Most authors use a selection of these terms as synonyms. Though the word "command" is more popular among unlimited natalists, it is also used by writers in the large-but-limited camp, for example Mohler ("Childlessness"). Tim Bayly writes that "God commanded Adam and Eve—and Noah as well—to be fruitful and multiply" (15), and he is a limited natalist, so the argument from command is not restricted to one camp.

Reception of the Genesis 1:28 imperative differs between unlimited and limited types of writer. The former employ it in arguments for procreationism, but also link it to their natalism: "God's first command ... is a clear instruction ... to have lots of children" (Houghton 28). For limited natalists there continues to be an imperative, to seek a large family, but its application should vary depending on circumstances and how many children a couple already has. Owen claims "the Fall has not eliminated God's commands. It has, however, created a tension between the ideal and its realization." Consequently "in certain situations couples may be unable to comply" and then family limitation may be permissible (Owen 78). For limited natalists the command conveys a paradigmatic principle.

Unlimited natalists are less willing to allow for dispensational differences and the command simply applies in the same way as it did originally. Provan argues: "Nowhere is this command done away with in the entire Bible; therefore it still remains valid for us today" (5). He points to the precedent of Exodus 36, where God

commands items be brought for the tabernacle and later tells Moses they should stop bringing items as there are enough. This is interpreted as indicating a norm that commands must be obeyed until an explicit countermand is given, for “he would let us know when the world was full” (42). Heine similarly claims the imperative has not lapsed, for “God put no expiration date on His order” (58).

### **Cultural mandate**

The imperative is not arbitrary but works towards God’s plan for humankind to fill and subdue the earth, the cultural mandate. The reason for “God’s desire for families to be prolific” is the “Genesis mandate of filling the earth” which is relevant today because “there is still land to be subdued” (Heine 15, 84). Parents should “bring forth many children ... to subdue the earth” and to “manage God’s creation” (Campbell 7, 14). This indicates the reason for marriage. “God gave Eve to Adam to be his helper. Why? Because Adam had been assigned a project ... [to] fill the earth and subdue it ... [so] the biblical reason for marriage is ... to produce children” (Pride 19). Doug Wilson links two purposes of marriage to dominion. The first is “companionship in the labor of dominion” because the “cultural mandate ... is still in force” and the second is reproduction because a man alone is helpless to fulfil this command (19-20). This idea is critiqued in chapters 4 and 6.

The importance of the actions “multiply” and “fill” in advancing God’s purpose is reinforced by a vision of the fallen cursed earth as a disordered place to which humankind must bring order. Some, including Beisner and Andrews, add a belief that corruption of the earth and nonhuman creatures by fallen angels predates the creation of Adam, and God’s intention for humankind was that they recapture territory from Satan’s rule (Andrews 30), by multiplying and spreading from Eden. Beisner adds that humankind was mandated to expand the Garden of Eden with a

goal of “transforming all the earth into a garden” (Beisner, *Garden* 185).<sup>74</sup> Population growth is therefore a help toward achieving the earth’s “cleansing and transformation from wilderness to garden” (*Garden* 190). Human reproduction operates here as part of a postmillennial programme to reclaim the fallen Earth.<sup>75</sup>

### **Growth and high density as God’s will**

Some take the large numbers of Israelites in the exodus from Egypt, and the divine superintendence of rapid population growth, as an indication that God desires a high density of human habitation. Beisner claims that in calculating the number of Israelites who left Egypt there is “one firm figure” (*Garden* 174): the census which apparently records 603,550 men aged at least twenty and fit for war (Numbers 1:46). Other natalists use the same number as their starting point.

One implication is the rate of Israelite population growth during their time in Egypt. Heine observes that “history’s first population boom is recorded in the Bible, after Jacob and his clan migrated to Egypt” (190). Given his starting point of 600,000 fighting men, Heine’s estimate of the total at two million is rather low. Even so, for the original seventy (Exodus 1:5) to reach that number implies that for 430 years (Exodus 12:14) an average annual growth rate of 2.4% was sustained. There is no pre-modern instance of comparable sustained growth. Heine further claims that even after this boom, from “God’s perspective they had not multiplied enough” because two promises given to the Israelites in Exodus 23:26 would produce more growth:

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74. Beisner’s vision of an expanding garden is essential to his critique of environmentalist Christians’ appeals for benevolent dominion (Genesis 2:15), which he argues applies only inside the garden (i.e. domesticated spaces) whereas a subjugating dominion (Genesis 1:28) should apply to the wilderness outside the garden. Beisner teaches a spatially differentiated mandate, inside and outside the garden, but this distinction is not obvious in Genesis 1 and 2. His claim that Adam was supposed to expand the garden is also dubious because the garden has an “eastern entrance” (later guarded by kerubim) which suggests a secure perimeter fixed when God planted the garden. Beisner’s metaphor sounds more like the *moving* frontier of the American West. Finally, it is hard to see how a garden expansion metaphor works after Adam is expelled and denied access to the garden.

75. This reverses the traditional reading of Genesis 3 in which the locus of sin and Fall is located in the human beings, whose corruption somehow affects other earthly creatures. Beisner’s interpretation makes the nonhuman world the primary location of disorder, and humankind becomes the agent capable of restoring the fallen cursed Earth.

“God promised them long life and no miscarriages ... conditions for a population explosion” (61). Further in Deuteronomy 1:11, Moses wishes the people were a thousand times more numerous (190).<sup>76</sup> Heine claims this shows that rapid population growth is a divine purpose.

Another implication is high population density. Beisner uses an estimate of family size partly based on OT genealogies to suggest an “Exodus population of 3-5 million” (*Garden* 174). He calculates the “population density in Goshen” (the region of Egypt where the Israelites lived) as between 1,200 and 3,125 per square mile, and correctly states “very few modern countries have such high population densities” (175). It is similar to the density today in the most populous areas of the Nile delta. Beisner regards this as evidence of a general divine intention for high population density. The accounts of Israelite numbers in the promised land are also used, though the density here is less extreme than for Goshen. Pride observes that Israel was a “very small area” but despite this in Deuteronomy 28:11 “God was promising them a population explosion in a limited area with limited resources” (58). OT accounts of Goshen and Palestine are read as models for a lesson that apparent limits of land and resources should not constrain fecundity.

### **Order of created nature**

Creation testifies that humans are designed for biological reproduction. Steve and Candice Watters claim that since form follows function so “our bodies testify” by their design to “the mysteries of our purpose.” They point also to lessons from nonhuman nature, citing Job 12 “ask the animals, and they will teach you” (35).<sup>77</sup> This is confirmed by Scripture, for “He called them—and is still calling us ... to be productive in fruitfulness ... the full, abundant life that can only come through being fruitful” (Watters 34). Similarly from the unlimited camp, Campbell asserts: “We were born to reproduce! All nature and all mankind were created for this purpose” (Campbell 49). This idea is challenged in chapter 6.

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76. The context is Moses calling for judges to be appointed because with larger numbers: “How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife?”

77. Steve Watters is Director of Young Adults at Focus on the Family (a large Christian ministry), and Candice Watters was editor of *Boundless* magazine.

Nature may indicate all are called to reproduce, but that is tempered by the limited scope of God's imperative which is addressed to a married couple, and therefore is a call only to married people. Provan calls Genesis 1:28 a "command to mankind" but immediately qualifies it as a "command to a married couple" (5). He clarifies that it is "not an absolute command for all people, just married people" (41). He and other natalists assume that the words of 1:28 are spoken to Adam and Eve after their marriage, which is located at 2:25. "What are the first words the Bible records God speaking to Adam and Eve as a couple? Be fruitful" (Watters 38). One reason for limiting the scope is to harmonize Genesis 1:28 with commendations of singleness found in the New Testament, and the examples of Jesus and Paul. Owen imagines a defender of family planning saying that God "commanded the human race to multiply but He does not require every member of it to reproduce." In response he admits that "marriage is not mandated" and notes 1 Corinthians 7, but argues that once someone chooses to marry then the mandate applies to them (39). This effort to harmonize the Old and New Testaments by limiting the scope of 1:28 is a weak link in natalist exegesis and is critiqued in chapter 4.

Nature and Scripture indicate that marriage is normal. "While a few are called to celibacy, the whole tenor of Scripture is that wedlock is the usual course of life for the majority" (Owen 30). Parents should assume that their children will be called to marriage and train them accordingly. Campbell cites 1 Timothy 5:8 and urges: "We should teach our sons ... that God has placed the responsibility upon them to one day provide for a family" (39). Some natalists acknowledge the prevalence of singleness among early church leaders and the commendation of "eunuchs for the Kingdom". This anomaly is dealt with by treating singleness as an exceptional state that requires a special gift and individual calling from God, whereas marriage is the default path of life. Most are content to leave it there, but a few argue that the commendation of singleness in 1st century Christianity was based on an idea that the end of the world was imminent. Heine also suggests that their "high regard for virginity" may reflect a "Greek-influenced obsession to suppress carnality" (142).

Delay in beginning reproduction is contrary to nature. Campbell cites the benefit of "sons born in one's youth" (Psalm 127) and judges that "God wants children to be born in our youth" (108). Watters also cites the Psalm and urges

couples to seek “children in your youth, the spring season of life” (92). Citing “a time to be born” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) Watters commends this “prime time for having babies, a window of opportunity” (85). Early marriage is advocated.

Supposed links between disease and reproductive behaviour are deployed to commend a more natural way of life. Campbell claims: “Women who have a full pregnancy before the age of 18 have one third the breast cancer risk” of those who delay to age 30, and “women with the least breast cancer were those who had the most children” (108). French claims the Pill doubles the risk of fatal heart attacks, and vasectomy is associated with auto-immune diseases and prostate cancer (41, 45). Other risks are linked with sterilization (Hess 126-31), and “the root cause of many diseases men suffer is vasectomy” (Campbell 183).<sup>78</sup> Two lines of argument are here combined: a promise that “none of these diseases” (Exodus 15:26) will afflict those obeying God (reproduction being the first commandment), and a belief that efforts to thwart the natural order of fertility are intrinsically unhealthy.<sup>79</sup>

### **Discipline for parents**

Some natalist writers regard parenthood as a discipline that conveys spiritual benefit.<sup>80</sup> They believe adults are shaped in Christian character through experiencing parenthood, and some rate as the primary instrument of Christian formation. Owen considers “family life ... the most comprehensive of all disciplines” (64). Kurt Bruner claims that “the most direct and intentional path to ... conforming our lives to the image of Christ ... [is] in a word, parenthood” (Watters 10). This ideology is not inherently natalist but can function that way. Two parameters of parental experience understood as discipline are its intensity and duration. Intensity is not necessarily proportional to the number of offspring, and the labour of parenting an only child could be lifelong. However, some claim numerous offspring are more powerfully formative than a few. “With each child we have been forced to grow ... in patience,

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78. These claims contradict the consensus of medical advice, which is that vasectomy is safe and rarely causes any disease (Schwingl & Guess).

79. I do not endorse any of these medical claims, some or all of which are spurious.

80. This argument is in contrast to the idea described earlier and held by a few natalists that parenthood (as a real blessing) normally delivers wealth and health. It relies on a spiritualization of the OT concept of blessing.



faith, wisdom, and love” and in general “as we have more children, we mature more” (89, 91). Also if the most intense discipline is the care of infants, then to not limit that experience to a few years but to extend its duration through additional births would be a stronger discipline.

Steve and Candice Watters describe some troubles of parenthood and then wonder rhetorically “should we really encourage other couples to do this? This is brutal.” They then answer their own doubts with a belief that suffering produces Christian character, and “we just didn’t have many opportunities to rejoice in our sufferings before we had kids. We didn’t have the benefit of being tested by a furnace of affliction” (56). I see a parallel here with the rise of white martyrdom (asceticism) in the 4th century, when one reason was the disappearance of imperial persecution (called red martyrdom because of the blood shed) in a Christianized empire. In this sense natalism is a new expression of asceticism among American Evangelicals, but only a few natalists make use of this argument that fecundity is a character-forming penitential discipline.

### **Sovereignty of God in planning families**

Unlimited natalists claim that God controls fertility perfectly and therefore humans are foolish to intervene in the timing, spacing, or number. The first step is the assertion that “God opens and closes the womb! He alone decides when and ... if we have any more children” (Hess 23). Many texts (including Genesis 29:31; 30:2 and 1 Samuel 1:6) are cited in support of this belief. The second step is to argue from divine omniscience and benevolence that “God Himself is our birth Controller ... so perfectly that I have absolutely no reason to take over the responsibility,” and this constitutes a “doctrine of divine planned parenthood” (Hess 141). God’s control implies that “we cannot over-reproduce” because He would close the womb before that happened (86). This can be combined with the character-forming idea, for as individuals parents need different types and amounts of discipline, but only God knows what make-up of family they need, so parents should not try to arrange this. Hess asks rhetorically (62): “Can I trust God to do the best for me in terms of family size and spacing?”

Isaac was born at the “appointed time” (Genesis 21:1) showing that God’s timing is perfect, and Pride argues that He desires to “choose the best children for

us” but human planning can result in sub-optimal family design. “Spacing is the attempt to usurp God’s sovereignty by self-crafting one’s family” and she cites Psalm 127 against those who “labor in vain ... trying to build their families themselves.” We could miss a particular intended child due to bad timing in conception for “who can tell but that one special combination of genes will produce the greatest revival preacher ... or the greatest musician” (Pride 77). More often we miss those offspring simply because we limit numbers. French confesses that “I don’t want to stand before the Lord and have him tell me that I would have birthed the next Beethoven or Galileo or Moody or Da Vinci if only I’d allowed Him to give me one more (or two more or three more or however many more) children” (108).

Provan claims that family planning “eliminates future people” and argues that predestination is no excuse (24). He imagines a present real existence of these potential people, citing Levi’s presence in the loins of Abram (Hebrews 13:4). No other natalist makes claims for pre-existence, but some draw on the wider concept of potential future people. Hess expands it greatly, and presents lists of US Presidents, musicians, famous Christians, and biblical characters, whose birth order was fourth or later (46-57). The lists include Augustine (a fourth child), Jonathan Edwards (eleventh), Dwight Moody (sixth), and John Wesley (fifteenth). Hess notes that David was an eighth son (1 Samuel 16:10) and asks “what if Jesse had stopped after seven sons.” He speculates: “if Jacob had stopped after eleven sons” (Genesis 35:18) “we would be missing ... [NT letters] written by the Apostle Paul, a descendant of thirteenth-born Benjamin” (56). Readers who are inclined to dismiss this as ludicrous should note that a concept of contingent future people (in more sophisticated forms) is taken seriously by philosophers (Fotion and Heller).

The idea that divine sovereignty precludes human family planning features only in writings of the unlimited type, and is rejected by large-but-limited natalists, and others. Mohler considers the idea analogous to medical non-intervention, and asks how those reasoning in this way can justify using antibiotics to thwart God’s sovereignty over death (“Population”). Doriani suggests that the message “don’t plan” is popular because “many people like simple solutions ... [and] they like to be told what to do” (31). However, while rejecting the sovereignty arguments at the level of individual families, at least one limited natalist, Calvin Beisner, affirms a

belief that divine superintendence prevents humankind from seriously damaging the ecosphere. One implication is that whatever number of offspring are born in aggregate across a nation must be compatible with the capacity of that land, since God is allowing that number to be born.

### **Overall picture of natalist arguments**

A count of how often types of argument appears in the sources was generated from the database. Most common, with 72 instances, was a paradigmatic idea that God wants fruitfulness, which encompasses all the arguments. Among the specific points, the counts were as follows: blessing (41),<sup>81</sup> practical help including care for elderly parents (19), refining discipline for parents (15), other spirituality benefits (18), church growth (22), national economy (9), command (12), and natural created order (18, including 9 for the purpose of marriage). This reinforces my impression that earlier critiques' focus on portraying Genesis 1:28 as a blessing not a command is not sufficiently helpful for opposing natalist reception.

### **Conclusion**

The first part of this chapter set Evangelical natalism in the USA in the context of wider attitudes to fertility, and historical change in these. Though natalism since 1985 can be regarded as a renaissance of interpretations that were common in early 20th century Protestantism, it differs in significant ways. The new natalism has renounced racist, eugenic, or nationalist beliefs and therefore some previous critiques are misdirected. This provides additional warrant for a fresh analysis. Nineteen printed primary sources were identified as natalist, and the biblical reception and associated arguments found in them were systematically analyzed. The major headings under which natalist ideas were presented in this chapter will reappear in the structure of each of the subsequent evaluative chapters.

The arguments for natalism are that high fertility is a blessing, that is a real benefit for family, nation, economy, and church. It is also a divine command, cultural mandate, the natural created order, and a formative discipline for parents. All these arguments can be found among both types of natalist: ordinary natalists who accept

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81. This includes 15 counts of the inverse argument, that to be barren is a curse.

family planning, and the unlimited type who add procreationism to their natalism. While there is a divide between the two types over the issue of human planning, their arguments for fecundity are similar. They have much in common and whereas previous critics have focused on unlimited natalists, it is appropriate to treat both types together as parts of the Protestant natalist phenomenon.

### Chapter 3. Martin Luther: forerunner of natalism?

This chapter investigates the claim that Martin Luther was a forerunner of modern advocacy of high birth rates. The first part introduces those modern retrievals of Luther's writings: the natalists' own Protestant *ressourcement*. The second part admits Luther attacked celibacy and promoted marriage, but argues that his motives were not demographic. The third and fourth parts evaluate Provan's use of Luther's works, with regard to Luther's pastoral and theological aims, and his hermeneutics of the Old Testament. The fifth part evaluates natalist aggrandizement in the light of Luther's eschatology, and considers social natalism in the context of German demography in Luther's lifetime.

#### Luther's words and their reception

When modern Protestant natalists look to Christian history for support the writer most often quoted is Martin Luther. Charles Provan in his first chapter deploys fourteen quotations from Luther, many of them half a page long (2-32). Allan Carlson includes seventeen quotations from Luther in a 2007 article ("Children" 20-23). He also cites Luther in support of natalism in an earlier article ("Freedom" 196), and briefly elsewhere (*Conjugal* 12). So two very different natalists both cite Luther extensively: Provan is a non-academic, whereas Carlson is a professional historian. Luther is also cited briefly by Mohler ("Mystery"), Bayly (15), Watters (117), French (34), and Houghton (56), of whom the first three are limited natalists while the other two are unlimited natalists.

Luther's writings contain material amenable to natalism. For example, his advocacy of universal early marriage would increase birth rates if implemented, especially in the 16th century European context where the main constraints on fertility were age at marriage, and the percentage of women who never married. Many statements on this theme can be found in Luther. The example below is quoted by Provan (2) and Carlson ("Children" 21), and is found near the beginning of Luther's 1522 treatise on the *Estate of Marriage*:

"Be fruitful and multiply." From this passage we may be assured that man and woman should and must come together in order to multiply. Now this

ordinance is just as inflexible as the first<sup>82</sup> ... since God gives it his blessing and does something over and above the act of creation. Hence, as it is not within my power not to be a man, so it is not my prerogative to be without a woman. Again, as it is not in your power not to be a woman, so it is not your prerogative to be without a man. For it is not a matter of free choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing, that whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man. For this word which God speaks, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is not a command. It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. Rather, it is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it. Therefore, just as God does not command anyone to be a man or a woman but creates them the way they have to be, so he does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply. And wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery, and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice. (LW 45.18)<sup>83</sup>

Luther makes a smaller number of statements praising human fertility, and these are even more amenable to natalists, especially since almost all of them shy away from teaching an imperative for single people to marry. Provan quotes the following words once in full (5-6), and again in part (28). They come from a sermon where Luther comments on Rachel’s envy (Genesis 30:1) of her sister’s reproductive success:

Although we like and desire it in cattle, yet in the human race there are few who regard a woman’s fertility as a blessing. Indeed, there are many who have an aversion for it and regard sterility as a special blessing. Surely this is also contrary to nature. Much less is it pious and saintly. For this affection has been implanted by God in man’s nature, so that it desires its increase and multiplication. Accordingly, it is inhuman and godless to have a loathing for offspring. Thus someone recently called his wife a sow, since she gave birth rather often. The good-for-nothing and impure fellow! The saintly fathers<sup>84</sup> did not feel like this at all; for they acknowledged a fruitful wife as a special blessing of God and, on the other hand, regarded sterility as a curse. And this judgment flowed from the Word of God in Gen.1:28, where He said: “Be fruitful and multiply.” (LW 5.325)

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82. Luther identified the first ordinance as the creation of gender in Genesis 1:27.

83. LW is the American edition of *Luther’s Works*.

84. The phrase “saintly fathers” refers to the Israelite patriarchs in Genesis.

Luther's words are important not least because of his past and present influence. Spangenberg in 1561 claimed that Luther's writings "may rightly be called ... Paul's mouth, ... Peter's key, and the Holy Spirit's sword" and should "be held in all honor next to the Holy Bible" (Kolb 48). Luther's influence extends beyond Lutherans to Protestants and others today, whether consciously (Hendrix, "Future") or subliminally. Luther's words have been used in support of opposing visions. In theological disputes after his death two Lutheran factions deployed his words for "authoritative pronouncement" and both sides were able to find support within his writings for contradictory systematizations of his thought (Kolb 41, 45). The size and nature of Luther's corpus of writing makes it especially susceptible to conflicting receptions and uses.

The character of Luther's works must be considered. He did not leave a systematic theology; instead his exegesis and thought is spread across a huge collection of sermons, treatises, and letters.<sup>85</sup> The compiler of the index to *Luther's Works*, Joel Lundeen, after reading the whole set recorded his impression that Luther "often wrote in a hurry" and rarely went back to revise (Foreword LW 55.vii).<sup>86</sup> Luther's thought continued developing to the end of his life, so self-contradiction is likely. Much was occasional writing in response to events at Wittenberg or nearby. Many of his pastorally motivated works were designed to meet the needs of particular audiences (Hendrix, "Future" 128), so their retrieval today for use in contemporary debates requires close attention to their immediate historical context.

Luther's comments on the fruitful verses,<sup>87</sup> and his thoughts on fecundity are scattered across many of his writings. Most significant are his references to "be

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85. Only a third of Luther's writings, and less than a tenth of his two thousand surviving sermons, appear in the English translation of his works (LW). That will change, as plans for a new series of twenty volumes were recently announced by Press, but for now some of the material in the German edition of Luther's works (WA) which is not in LW has been translated in secondary sources, so those are cited here. I found especially helpful *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (LS) edited by Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner, whose choice of extracts for translation prioritized material that does not appear in LW.

86. Exceptions to this rule are his Bible translation, Catechisms, and the Smalcald Articles.

87. These were identified using the Scripture Index in *Luther's Works* (LW 55).

fruitful and multiply” which appear in commentaries on Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, Hosea and Zechariah; in sermons on marriage in 1519 and 1531; in the treatises *Monastic Vows* (1521), *Estate of Marriage* (1522), and *Exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order* (1523); in a commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 written as a wedding present in 1523 (LW 28.3); and within *Table Talk*.<sup>88</sup> Luther’s commentaries are essentially sermons: they were preached from very brief outlines, and published from hearers’ transcripts. He preached twice weekly to trainees for the Protestant ministry as a model of homiletic suitable for their congregations (Baue 410; Nestingen, “Front” 191). From 1523 to 1524 these sermons covered Genesis and were printed as *Declamationes* in 1527 (Mattox, *Defender* 31, 262).<sup>89 90</sup> He returned to preach on Genesis at greater length from 1535 to 1545 and these were published by 1554, years after Luther’s death, as *Enarrationes*.<sup>91</sup>

Little research has been done on Luther’s writings with regard to the theme of fertility, let alone natalism in particular. David Yegerlehner devotes a section of his thesis about historical reception of OT “fruitfulness texts” to Luther (160-72). He refers to Luther’s commentaries but not to his treatises, and gives little historical context. Jeremy Cohen’s survey of the ancient and medieval career of Genesis 1:28 stops at the year 1500, but his conclusion includes one page on Luther and claims he led a revolution in Christian interpretation of the verse (307). Surveys of Luther’s thought on the topics of marriage and family, by Scott Hendrix in 2000 and Janet

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88. *Table Talk* was recorded (and sanitized) by Luther’s followers and is treated with caution. It consists of snippets of Luther’s conversations with disciples and guests.

89. *Declamationes* is entirely omitted from LW but some is translated in LS.

90. Most of Luther’s writings are referred to in (American) Luther studies by English titles, but for these two series of sermons on Genesis (presumably to avoid confusion) the Latin titles in this abbreviated form are commonly used (as in Mattox, *Defender*).

91. The authenticity of *Enarrationes* is debated. Luther died three months after finishing the sermons and their publication was done by his disciples, especially Veit Dietrich. In 1936 Peter Meinhold claimed *Enarrationes* was edited to support Melanchthon during theological disputes after Luther’s death (Nesting, “Front” 187-89). Though Jaroslav Pelikan (the editor of LW) was confident that the words are mostly Luther’s (LW 1.x-xi), little use was made of them in Luther studies until a rehabilitation began in the 1990s. After surveying this debate, Mickey Mattox in 2003 concluded that *Enarrationes* preserves the “authentic voice” of Luther (*Defender* 81, 263-73), and I find his argument convincing.



Strohl in 2008, say little about fertility. Steven Ozment does discuss it but does not deal with biblical reception (8, 101). Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner survey research looking at Luther's works from the perspective of gender and sexuality (7-8), but it is concerned with issues such as women's status, and the matter of fecundity is rarely addressed directly.

### **Luther's battle against works-religion and sin**

Luther's application of "be fruitful and multiply" should be understood in the context of theological concerns which converged on the issue of celibacy. His emphasis on justification by faith, and his war with a religion of salvation by works (as he saw it) led him to attack vowed celibacy (Bultmann 425; Ozment 1). He was also deeply concerned about sin and its consequences, and one breeding ground of sin (in his view) was vowed celibacy which led to idleness and sexual immorality.<sup>92</sup> To illustrate this I will explain the historical situation, Luther's motives in opposing celibacy, his strategy of promoting marriage, and his construal of marriage as a penitential discipline.

Luther's ideas arose in the context of a unique event, the 16th century revolt within the elite of the Catholic church. Many early Protestant leaders were celibate (as monks, friars, priests, or in minor orders) before they changed allegiance (Chadwick, *Reformation* 151), and a central feature of the Reformation was the shift from a celibate to a married church leadership. This event was experienced intensely by Luther who had been an earnest monk but came to believe he had lived a false piety that trusted in works for salvation. His vow was especially invalid in his eyes because it was against his father Hans' wishes. Luther writes "I recall that my father despised the monks ... accordingly, when I first entered the monastery ... my father bore this with the greatest reluctance" (LW 8.181). Later he wrote to his father:

It is now nearly sixteen years since I became a monk, against your wishes and without your knowledge ... Your own plan for my future was to tie me down with an honourable and wealthy marriage ... you said - "May it not prove an illusion and a deception." That word penetrated and lodged in the depths of my soul, as if God had spoke through your mouth; but I hardened

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92. Luther perceived other sources and types of sin, including the ways of market traders, business and usury. His idea of sin was not narrow in scope.

my heart against you and your word as much as I could. You said something else ... “Have you not also heard that parents are to be obeyed?” ... my vow was not worth a straw, because in taking it I was withdrawing myself from the will and authority of my parent.<sup>93</sup> (LW 48.331)

Luther intervened in the debate over compulsory celibacy for priests in 1520,<sup>94</sup> and in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* observed that “many a poor priest is overburdened with wife and child, his conscience troubled” because of the “universal commandment forbidding priests to marry,” and advised the Pope to “leave every man free to marry or not to marry” (LW 44.175). Luther turned his attention to monastic celibacy during his exile at Wartburg when in November 1521 at the Augustinian house at Wittenberg a monk began urging departure (Lohse 141). By February 1522 the community was depleted from thirty friars to six, and by 1523 only three diehards remained of whom one was Luther who kept all his vows and wore his habit until October 1524, at a time when in some Protestant towns anyone seen in a habit risked being pelted with mud or thrown out of church (Chadwick, *Reformation* 153, 156). Luther believed that outward disciplines were beneficial if done with a good conscience, but perilous if regarded as works for salvation.

### **Motives for the campaign**

Luther’s first motive for attacking vowed celibacy was his pastoral concern for the consciences of those constrained, either by their own scruples or pressure from others, to keep vows which they regretted. He was especially concerned about those put inside religious houses as youths by their parents (LW 44.216), and also young adults who joined impetuously (LW 39.296). Luther’s treatise *Monastic Vows* declared such vows to be invalid, and in a 1524 pamphlet *How God Rescued an*

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93. Luther affixed this letter to his father as the dedication of his treatise *Monastic Vows* in November 1521. His father Hans had risen from being a peasant to a mine-owner and paid to send his son to Erfurt university to become a lawyer. Martin’s decision at age 23 to abandon this career and enter a monastery provoked his father temporarily to “cut me off from all further paternal grace.” Erik Erikson judged Luther’s relation with his parents significantly formative for his thought, but most historians are wary of psychological methods.

94. The chronology of the celibacy crisis is outlined by Bernhard Lohse (137-43).

*Honorable Nun* he argued that “God wants no forced service ... They should be released because man is not created for celibacy but to multiply” (LW 43.87).

His second motive arose from his view that monasticism often led to sin. He criticized wealthy religious orders for economic parasitism and laziness. In his job as regional supervisor of Augustinian houses Luther had been informed about cases of immorality. In his later writings he passes on rumours about friars’ fornications, infanticide at nunneries, and “Italian marriages” (homosexuality) among supposed celibates (LW 39.241; 46:198). He is alluding to such tales when he refers to common knowledge of the results of celibacy.

Luther’s third motive was to save people from temporal disaster. He perceived a chain of consequence from the avoidance of marriage to sexual immorality which brought not only peril to souls but also temporal judgment on communities.<sup>95</sup> His belief in the link between sin (in general) and trouble is clear, for he wrote: “when new sins increase, new punishments also increase. Within our own time unusual kinds of diseases and disasters have become widespread” (LW 2.136). In 1538 while preaching on the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19) he remarked that “this year, a goodly part of the earth in the territory of Naples ... vanished because of an earthquake and an inundation—not by some chance, as the papists think, but because of the sins of the people” (LW 3.295). The contribution of sexual immorality is illustrated in his statement in 1522:

The estate of marriage, however, redounds to the benefit not alone of the body, property, honor, and soul of an individual, but also to the benefit of whole cities and countries, in that they remain exempt from the plagues imposed by God. We know only too well that the most terrible plagues have befallen lands and people because of fornication. (LW 45.44)

His fourth motive arose from his soteriology of justification by faith alone. Writing in *Good Works* (LW 44.24) in 1520, and in *Monastic Vows* (LW 44.262, 290, 301), Luther identified the vows of monks and priests as the mainspring of papal theology and the religious culture of (as he saw it) salvation by works (Pelikan 76; Wendebourg 133). He also considered that the religious who were genuinely

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95. The arrival in 1494 of syphilis, previously unknown in Europe, had provoked a debate. The emperor Maximilian (in a 1497 edict) declared it to be a punishment for blasphemy, but others linked it to sexual immorality (Cunningham and Grell 248-53).

chaste but trusted in that for their salvation were in spiritual peril for “all nuns and monks who lack faith, and who trust in their own chastity and in their order ... cannot boast that what they do is pleasing in God’s sight” (LW 45.41). These motives moved Luther, in his roles as pastor, prophet, and theologian, to urgent and forceful exegesis of Genesis to promote marriage and child-rearing as a religious vocation to replace vowed celibacy.

### **Strategy of promoting marriage**

The only solution to all these problems was marriage, the estate ordained in Genesis (LW 1.115). Luther deemed it the antidote to lust and fornication, for “the married estate is for evermore a hospital to the sick, so that they do not fall into greater sin” (LS 91). So he urged early marriage. In 16th century western Europe, the average age at first marriage was around 25 for a man and 21 for a woman,<sup>96</sup> whereas Luther in *The Estate of Marriage* asserted; “A young man should marry at the age of twenty at the latest, a young woman at fifteen to eighteen” (LW 45.48). The reason he gave is significant: “A girl of eighteen is ready for marriage, for this age feels the burning of the flesh” (LS 149). Luther’s concern is the age at which he considers temptation becomes too strong. His focus is the young adult’s spiritual welfare, not the potential increase of reproduction. Luther urged parents to help every one of their children to marry:

Parents should understand that a man is created for marriage, to beget fruit of his body (just as a tree is created to bear apples or pears), unless his nature is altered ... by supreme grace or a special miracle. Therefore, they are in duty bound to assist their children to marry, removing them from the perils of unchastity. (LW 45.390)

In 16th century Europe about 15% of adults never married (LS 7). Some of those were vowed celibates, and Luther blamed that on the imagined spiritual superiority of celibacy. Many others were simply unmarried, and Luther identified various reasons for this, including the bad reputation of marriage, worries about subsistence, and canon law. He wanted to demolish whatever delayed or prevented marriage. Luther judged that many people remained single because marriage had

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96. A study of the elite of Wurttemberg found an average age at first marriage of 25.3 years for men and 21.4 for women (Ozment 38).

been given a bad reputation (LW 45.22, 390). Ozment claims that in early 16th century Europe marriage had become a “despised, and rejected estate” (4, 44).

Luther’s assessment in 1522 was similar:

The estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute ... Every day one encounters parents who ... deter their children from marriage but entice them into priesthood and nunnery, citing the trials and troubles of married life. Thus do they bring their own children home to the devil, as we daily observe; they provide them with ease for the body and hell for the soul. (LW 45.37)

According to Protestant historiography this popular view was the result of medieval preachers denigrating marriage.<sup>97</sup> Luther aimed to repair the damage. He advertised that “the most pleasant life is an average home life” (LS 149, *Table Talk*). Luther wanted to dissuade young people from entering religious orders, and persuade them to marry instead. In his 1523 commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, he wrote that “God has laid it upon me to preach about marriage and to tear the veil from the chastity which is of the devil, so that there may be less fornication and our poor youth may not be so pitiably and dangerously misled by falsely glorified chastity” (LW 28.5). And in 1524 Luther complained: “The whole world still cries out about what an evil thing marriage is” (LS 24). In 1531 he exhorted wedding guests that “we must lift this estate even higher, praise and honor it even more” (LS 153).

Lack of economic means should not delay marriage in Luther’s view. Carlson quotes Luther’s assurance to poor men: “Let God worry about how they and their children are to be fed. God makes children; he will surely also feed them” (LW 45.49). There is no optimistic cornucopian idea here for Luther also wrote that “today and always the whole creation is hardly sufficient to feed and support the human race” (LW 1.72). The moral risks of young people delaying marriage outweighed these economic hardships. In the special case of wealthy estates which sought to avoid subdivision of the inheritance between too many legitimate heirs Luther had no sympathy and wrote: “It is even more disgraceful that you find princes who allow themselves to be forced not to marry, for fear that the members of their house would increase beyond a definite limit” (LW 1.118).

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97. A fairer assessment might be that medieval Christians normally affirmed both celibacy and marriage but esteemed the former more highly.

Another obstacle to marriage was canon law. There was a ban on polygamy, strict control of divorce (with a requirement for expensive papal annulments), a range of prohibited degrees of relation including godparents and their relatives, and other “impediments” including a ban on interfaith marriages. Luther called for abolition of all such laws, except those on polygamy and the close relatives explicitly forbidden in Scripture. He writes in *Estate of Marriage* “let us now consider which persons may enter into marriage with one another” (LW 45.22), proceeds to attack those canon laws one by one, including the impediment of faith:

The fifth impediment is unbelief; that is, I may not marry a Turk, a Jew, or a heretic [... but] marriage is an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking. Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with, buy from, speak to, and deal with a heathen, Jew, Turk, or heretic, so I may also marry and continue in wedlock with him. Pay no attention to the precepts of those fools who forbid it. You will find plenty of Christians—and indeed the greater part of them—who are worse in their secret unbelief than any Jew, heathen, Turk, or heretic. A heathen is just as much a man or a woman—God’s good creation, as St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. Lucy. (LW 45.25)

Luther’s view that, for example, it is appropriate for a Muslim to marry a Christian indicates how far he was from any sectarian natalism, which is incompatible with mixed-faith marriages. Luther’s motive in wanting to remove these impediments was to help people escape the temptations afflicting the unmarried. For the same reason he attacked Jerome for his “shameful book against Jovinian about widows who transgress against their first troth and fidelity, just as though it were improper for them to remarry” (LS 130). Luther wanted to encourage widows to remarry quickly. Removal of the impediments would, by increasing marriages also increase the birth rate but the latter was not Luther’s motive here.

### **Child-rearing as penitential discipline**

Weddings might prevent fornication, but for the sins of idleness and greed a further medicine was needed in Luther’s view: the responsibilities of parenthood. Luther critiqued the lifestyle of monks and friars not only for producing fornication but also for its dependence on endowments and begging (by friars) which led to idleness. His vision for marriage transferred to this estate what he regarded as the better features of Augustinian penitential discipline (LS 13). In the new marriage service liturgy, written by Luther for Wittenberg in 1524, the minister was to declare marriage “a penitential institution in which the wife freely accepts the pain of

childbirth ... and the husband the pain of daily labor and worry over his family's well-being" (Ozment 8).

Commenting on Genesis 3 in *Declamationes*, Luther stated that God's response to humankind's fall was not the deserved penalty of immediate extinction, but instead curses that are designed to help the soul by hurting the body. Aside from death, the curses on woman and man only become fully operational in parenthood, since they relate to child-bearing (for the woman), economically supporting the family (for the man), and the rearing of children (for both). Those who avoid family life by staying unmarried were missing out on these means of grace and were likely to end up being punished spiritually instead:

He gives the woman her torment, but ... absolves her of spiritual misery, and lays the penalty upon her body ... God turns eternal punishment into a temporal and physical one ... upon all those who shall become the daughters of Eve. It is not said to her alone. It is said as though they should all become pregnant ... This is a gentle, gracious punishment ... [but] the land is full whores and knaves ... everybody shies away from marriage because they might have grief with the bearing of children, that pertains to the woman, or the man because he has to provide for and nourish his wife and child ... Nobody wants to bear this burden, but it must be borne. If you do not take a wife and eat your bread in the sweat of your brow, God will take his punishment from your body and lay it upon your soul. This is not a good exchange. He wants to be gracious to the soul and helpful, but He rightly wants to torment the body. On that account, where people stand in faith, they ... bear this burden gladly - they take wives, labor, and let their lives be painful ... where one finds a marriage in which the wife has no misfortune with children and in which the husband is not bitter, something is not right. The world is so crazy and foolish, contrary to God, that it is of the opinion that one can be married ... only to have good days and live well. But God wants exactly the opposite. (LS 23)

In 1535, preaching on Rachel's desire for a son, Luther finds the same fault in those who, although they marry, contrive to be childless:

For most married people do not desire offspring. Indeed, they turn away from it and consider it better to live without children, because they are poor and do not have the means with which to support a household. But this is especially true of those who are devoted to idleness and laziness and shun the sweat and the toil of marriage. But the purpose of marriage is not to have pleasure and to be idle but to reproduce and bring up children, to support a household. This of course is a huge burden full of great cares and toils. But you have been created by God to be a husband or wife and that you may learn to bear these troubles. (LW 5.363)

Parenthood was construed by Luther as a religious vocation, and he hoped family households would be places of penance and discipline turned from self-oriented to neighbour-oriented works of piety (Mattox, *Defender* 252). Luther's reasons for wanting people to marry and rear children were primarily moral and spiritual rather than a natalist desire to increase the number of births.

## **Commands, and orders of creation**

I continue to evaluate natalist use of Luther here. Provan's nine reasons why the Bible forbids birth control include the claims that "multiply, and fill the earth" is a command to be obeyed today (5), that creation reveals child-bearing as "the natural function of women" (27), that "children are a blessing ... the more the better" (7), and that choosing to beget "less children than possible" is a sin (9). Provan quotes Luther's words in support of each of these ideas.<sup>98</sup> I evaluate the first two claims in this section and the remainder in the next section.

Provan portrays Genesis 1:28 as "the first command to a married couple." This sits uneasily with his earlier quotation from Luther (which appears above on the first page of my chapter) that it is "not a command" but a "nature", for God "does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply" (4). There is a difference. Provan implies it is a command addressed only to married couples. By contrast, the scope of a law of nature must be the whole species, implying a necessity for all to marry. The only exception to this logic is where the Creator miraculously alters an individual person's physical nature.

## **Singleness against the law of nature?**

Whereas the early Church Fathers believed God had established the estate of celibacy alongside marriage, Luther seems to claim that the Bible, created nature, physiology, and medical wisdom all indicate that everyone is made to reproduce. *Table Talk* observes: "Marriage exists in all nature, for among all creatures there is the male and the female. Even trees are married" (LS 122). Luther also says,

God presents to our eyes the marital estate in all creatures, ... among the birds, ... animals, ... fishes ... male and female are to be found among

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98. With regard to contraception, Christian tradition condemned this for reasons that were not natalist (as discussed in chapter 1) and Luther followed that tradition with little comment.



trees, such as apples and pears ... If one plants them beside one another, they grow and develop better near each other than otherwise. The man stretches out his branches toward the woman ... The sky is the man and the earth the woman; for the earth is made fruitful by the sky. (LS 124)

Luther asserted that “man is created ... to eat, drink, produce fruit of his body, sleep, and respond to other calls of nature. It is not within the power of any man to alter this” (LW 45.391). He suggested that a celibate is “like a man who resolved not to urinate” and who, in Luther’s anecdote, “held off for four days and became very sick” (LW 28.29). According to this rhetoric, celibacy or even continence prolonged for more than a few days is against nature and unhealthy for the human body. Luther writes in *Estate of Marriage*:

God’s word does not admit of restraint; neither does it lie when it says, “Be fruitful and multiply”. You can neither escape nor restrain yourself from being fruitful and multiplying; it is God’s ordinance and takes its course. Physicians are not amiss when they say: if this natural function is forcibly restrained it necessarily strikes into the flesh and blood and becomes a poison ... That which should have issued in fruitfulness and propagation has to be absorbed within the body. Unless there is terrific hunger<sup>99</sup> or immense labor or supreme grace, the body cannot take it; it necessarily becomes unhealthy and sickly. Hence we see how weak and sickly barren women are. Those who are fruitful, however, are healthier, cleaner, and happier. And even if they bear themselves weary—or ultimately bear themselves out—that does not hurt. Let them bear themselves out.<sup>100</sup> This is the purpose for which they exist. It is better to have a brief life with good health than a long life in ill health. (LW 45.45-46)

Although this would raise birth rates in practice, Luther’s focus here is on the adult, and specifically her physical health, rather than quantity of offspring. However in *Declamationes*, his early Genesis sermons, he does seem to portray reproduction as the main purpose of life. Eve had been created alongside Adam

to help him to give birth in accordance with God’s word, “Be fruitful and multiply.” ... Women are not created for any other purpose than to serve man and to be his assistant in producing children. (LS 17)

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99. Luther is referring to fasting (hunger) and physical work, both monastic disciplines.

100. The phrase “bear themselves out” refers to the premature death of women either during pregnancy or labour, or later as a result of its effects. For clarification, Luther suggests that barren women are sickly *because* they do not reproduce, rather than the reverse possibility of their being infertile because they are sickly or malnourished.

Luther affirmed that celibacy may be received as a gift, which could hardly be denied as the apostle Paul and most of the Early Fathers were celibate, but he treats celibacy as a theoretical possibility, rather than a live option, by arguing that it cannot be chosen. He also suggests the gift of celibacy had become rarer after the early church era, and vanishingly rare in his own era, which may be linked to his belief that humankind had continued to decline after the apostolic era (LW 2.7). An open letter in 1523 on *Why Virgins Are Allowed to Leave the Convent in a Godly Way* explains that nuns can and should leave because

it is impossible that the gift of chastity is as common as the convent. A woman is not created to be a virgin, but to bear children. In Genesis 1, God was not speaking just to Adam, but also to Eve when He said, “Be fruitful and multiply,” as the female organs of a woman’s body, which God has created for this reason, prove. And this was not just said to one or two women, but to all of them, with no exceptions. God establishes this not through our oaths or our free will, but through His own powerful means and will. Whenever He has not done this, a woman should remain a woman, and bear children, for God has created her for that. (LS 140)

In a letter of 1524 to three nuns, Luther went further in that he attempted to persuade contented nuns that their way of life must be false because the gift of celibacy had become very rare in his time:

Scripture and experience teach that among many thousands there is not one to whom God gives the grace to maintain pure chastity. A woman does not have the power herself. God created her body to be with a man, bear children and raise them, as Scripture makes clear in Genesis 1. Her bodily members, ordained by God for this, also demonstrate this. This is as natural as eating and drinking, sleeping and waking up. It is created by God and He also wants what is natural, that is men and women being together in marriage. (LS 141)

#### **Rhetorical use of “be fruitful and multiply”**

In general, Luther’s method of argument was “to take everything to its logical limit, to drive matters to extremes” and set up paradoxes (Matheson, *Rhetoric* 174), and his approach to theology tends toward sharp polarities. Also his expressive style tends to hyperbole in polemic and “extreme formulation” in exegesis (Pelikan 19).

Sometimes he was deliberately offensive to stir up his readers.<sup>101</sup> I contend that Luther's portrayal of "be fruitful and multiply" as a law of nature compelling all to marry, and making it impossible to abstain from conjugal relations, is an example of this style and should not be taken at face value. His meaning was easily mistaken even by contemporaries: in 1528 Johann Lansburg of Cologne wrote that Luther's idea of chastity as "beyond human nature" was an insult to courtiers, merchants, and all who had to be away from home for days on end, since it implied that they and their wives were inevitably guilty of adultery (Ozment 24).

Evidence for the presence of hyperbole comes where Luther makes apparently contradictory statements within a piece of writing. In his 1521 treatise on *Monastic Vows* he urges that "all monks be absolved from their vows" (LW 44.283)<sup>102</sup> and that any monk who finds lust irresistible should be free to marry (LW 44.337).<sup>103</sup> Luther imagines their colleagues saying to monks in that frame of mind: "You must pray to God for grace," and Luther responds to those counsellors that

you are trying to compel God to revoke his word, that divine commandment of nature by which he created all things, "Increase and multiply." All this is absurd and puerile. Each one is left to see from his own experience whether this law, or rather, privilege of increasing and multiplying, is quite settled and established, or whether he has the power to change things. (LW 44.339)

The claim seems to be that Genesis 1:28a testifies to an unalterable created order that makes celibacy impossible. But a few pages later Luther writes: "We do not advocate marriage as an easy way out ... We want it to be permitted, to be a matter of option, so that the man who is able may be continent for as long as he wants" (LW 44.395). The central idea of the treatise is after all that "lifelong poverty, obedience, and chastity may be observed, but cannot be vowed" (LW 44.315).

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101. As in *Against Hanswurst* (1541) and *Against the Papacy at Rome* (1545) for which Luther commissioned a set of cartoons with a defecation theme to illustrate his text (Matheson, *Rhetoric* 212).

102. Written in November 1521 and published in February 1522.

103. Near the end of this treatise Luther recognizes that his case against vows could be turned against marriage vows, and his attempt to distinguish between vows in the two circumstances is unconvincing.

Less than a year later *Estate of Marriage* includes what seems to be a strong assertion (which is quoted above on the first page of this chapter) that an immutable law of nature compels marriage for everyone. A few pages later in the treatise, he states that celibacy is impossible, because “he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality. How could it be otherwise, since God has created man and woman to produce seed and to multiply?” (LW 45.45). However a few pages further on Luther qualifies what he has written:

In saying this, I do not wish to disparage virginity, or entice anyone away from virginity into marriage. Let each one act as he is able, and as he feels it has been given to him by God. I simply wanted to check those scandal-mongers who place marriage so far beneath virginity. (LW 45.47)

Admittedly during this period Luther became increasingly antagonistic to celibacy. In 1520 he made a few critical remarks with balancing statements; in 1521 there are many apparently absolute statements disallowing celibacy but also some balancing remarks; but in 1522 he heaps hyperbole against singleness with only one qualifying statement at the end. Despite this imbalance, it is clear that Luther did not believe that a law of nature compelled everyone to marriage and reproduction.

### **Marriage and reproduction is not commanded**

Luther in the early 1520s was torn between a wish to allow voluntary celibacy and a worry that the mere existence of religious houses sent the wrong message to people: that life in the world is spiritually inferior (Chadwick, *Reformation* 152). His treatise *Monastic Vows* rejects permanent vows and condemns the idea that works justify, but allows voluntary monastic life with temporary vows as a legitimate path for Christians (Wendebourg 141), for “if you live with men of like mind ... without your thinking thereby that you are better than he who takes a wife or takes up farming, then in that case you are neither wrong to take vows nor wrong to live in this way” (LW 44.304). This exception was temporarily submerged by waves of Reformation hostility to monasticism, but in later years it resurfaced.

Evidence that Luther did not make marriage a law of nature appeared in the case of Oldenstadt Abbey. Duke Ernst of Luneberg disendowed that Benedictine house, and Abbot Gottschalk (who accepted Protestant theology) wrote to Luther asking if they could stay on there as monks under a modified Rule. Luther replied affirmatively in February 1528, and added on a personal note that if monasticism had

been practised in this manner earlier he would have stayed as a monk “because by virtue of this spirit of freedom it brings them joy.” Luther also wrote to Duke Ernst advising that monks “in the freedom of the Spirit” could “with great benefit remain in the monastery,” and in general defending those monasteries and convents which had re-ordered their houses in a Protestant manner (Wendebourg 142; Chadwick, *Reformation* 168).

Luther intervened in other cases. The best documented is Herford, where local pastors and the Town Council wanted to close both houses (Brothers and Sisters) of the Brethren of the Common Life, who obeyed a Rule of celibacy without permanent vows (Brecht 30; Chadwick, *Reformation* 166). Luther wrote to the Council in 1533 that “such communities are extraordinarily pleasing to me,” and he also wrote to the Brethren: “Your habit and your customs which you have so laudably preserved are in no way contrary to the Gospel but help its progress against the fanatics who want to pull everything down.” To the Sisters he wrote: “Your way of life, since you teach and live according to the Gospel, pleases me no end ... If only there had been, and were, more convents like yours” (Chadwick, *Reformation* 167). The Town Council relented, but instead proposed to stop new novices joining. Melancthon complained: “What is this new doctrine which forbids people to stay unmarried?” (Letter to the Brothers of Herford, 4 July 1533). Luther agreed, described the Town Council in October 1534 as “new Pharisees” (all quoted in Chadwick, *Reformation* 167). By this time he was sure celibacy was not against any law of nature, and that singleness was an option which an individual could choose.

In *Table Talk* for September 1538 discussing a letter received from some nuns elsewhere, Luther said: “One should allow such nuns to stay,” adding that he felt similarly about all well-ordered houses: “Nor have I proposed anything else from the beginning” (LW 54.312). One of the prompts to Luther’s early battles against vowed celibacy had been his concern for young people. After his move beyond the antagonism of the early 1520s to a more positive appreciation of voluntary celibacy in the 1530s, he preached in 1539 about “young people” that “if some have the gift of continence and are able to live chastely without marriage, let them by all means have

the benefit of continence and do without a wife” (LW 3.210).<sup>104</sup> Despite his rhetoric of the 1520s, he affirms that even the young can be single and are not compelled by a law of nature to marry and reproduce.

### **Saved through childbirth : then and now**

In this part the natalist arguments derived by Provan from the blessing of fertility and the curse of barrenness are evaluated. Also here we shift from looking at Genesis 1:28 to Genesis 3 and later chapters. The issues raised in the previous part affected Luther’s exegesis, but they were not the only influence. Luther did not simply recruit Genesis in support of his religious agenda. Especially in his sermon series going through Genesis systematically his OT hermeneutic shaped the results of his encounter with the text.

Salvation, and the saving faith that justifies, is closely associated with reproduction in Luther’s sermons on Genesis. The faith of the OT saints is mostly oriented toward childbirth: from the prophecy that seed born of woman would crush the seed of the serpent, through the promise to Sarah that she would bear a son, and the promises to Abraham and the other patriarchs that their descendants would number like dust or grass. Justification is by faith, and I will argue that Luther wants his hearers to imitate this faith, but not to place their faith in the same objects or to imitate the specific actions of the old covenant heroes.

Luther, following tradition, interpreted the text “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it will bruise your head” (Genesis 3:15) as a promise of the Messiah’s birth, so it is the first gospel, the *protoevangelion*. Luther also believed that Adam and Eve understood this. “Adam and Eve were encouraged by this promise. Wholeheartedly they grasped the hope of their restoration ... When Eve had given birth to her first-born son, she hoped that she already had that Crusher” (LW 1.193). They were justified by faith in this promise for “it contains the word of life by which they came back to life” (Mattox, *Defender* 61 quoting from *Declamationes*). Luther, linking Genesis 1:28, 2:24, and 3:15-17, discerned many divine purposes converging on childbirth:

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104. The date is is sometime before March 1539 according to Pelikan.

[Adam] understood that he was to produce offspring, especially since the blessing, “Increase and multiply,” had not been withdrawn, but had been reaffirmed in the promise of the Seed who would crush the serpent’s head. Accordingly, in our judgment Adam did not know Eve simply as a result of the passion of his flesh; but the need of achieving salvation through the blessed Seed impelled him too. (LW 4.237)

Luther portrays Adam as a model (especially for his original audience of ministerial candidates) in another way, as the first gospel preacher, who passed on the promise of a child Saviour to his descendants (Mattox, *Defender* 24), who in turn transmitted it across the generations to Noah and beyond:

This Light shone on the patriarchs before the Flood. They had the promise of the woman’s Seed, who was to crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). He was their Life and Light too. He illumined them to life eternal. With this promise they comforted themselves and bolstered their faith. Of Him they preached wherever they dwelt and thus passed this on to their progeny.

In theophanies God renewed the promise: “Thus it is an outstanding distinction that God bestows on Abraham when He speaks with him and gives him the promise concerning the Seed who was to bless all nations” (LW 2.236). Therefore all the patriarchs and their wives (matriarchs) knew this promise and laboured to bring it to fruition. But they did not know when the Saviour’s birth would happen. Luther suggested that Eve mistakenly assumed her firstborn son was the promised Saviour. Eve “had something greater in mind about him, as though Cain would be the man who would crush the head of the serpent” (LW 1.242). Baue notes Luther based this on a fresh Latin translation of Genesis 4:1 which, in English, says: “Eve said, I have acquired the man of the Lord” and this “goes a long way toward explaining the anxiety of Sarah and other barren women in the Bible. Someday *one* mother in Israel would be the mother of God” (Baue 410). Each woman descended from Eve heard the promise passed down and wondered if she would be the one favoured to bear the Christ child (Nestingen, “Front” 190 citing LW 1.191; 6.227). This was for them an additional reason to marry and bear children.

#### **Imitating the faith of patriarchs and matriarchs**

Luther links the messianic promise with later promises to Abraham (Mattox, *Defender* 61, 62, 95). Commenting on the promise of many descendants at Genesis 15:4 he claims that “Moses implies in a hidden fashion that this passage includes the promise about the spiritual and heavenly Seed, while previously he is speaking solely

of physical descendants” (LW 3.18). Although Abraham and his wife Sarah are old and infertile, he has faith in God’s word, in “things not yet seen,” and is justified and saved by this (LW 3.17). Commenting on Sarah’s laugh (Genesis 18:14) Luther draws a parallel with faith awakening in one of his congregation: “it is necessary for Sarah to hear a word by which she, as though brought back to life, may rise again to the hope of fruitfulness; for the word is truly a voice that raises from death” (LW 3.211). In Luther’s metaphor, sterility is spiritual death and fertility is spiritual life. Throughout the Genesis narratives the faith of the OT saints is focused on the genetic family and biological reproduction (and also on the promised land of Canaan, but Luther makes much less of that).

One medieval approach to exegesis presented edifying literal exegeses of Genesis’ narratives. Luther followed this tradition and refers to “the four righteous women, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel” (LS 37). He read Israel’s patriarchs and matriarchs as exemplars of virtue (Hendrix, “Background” 235, 238). Some stories about them are paradigms of repentance, in which the hero strays into sin but God gracefully speaks, restores, and renews the promise. But in other stories they are exemplars of a good life, and Luther labours to explain that actions which seem morally dubious actually spring from faith (Mattox, *Defender* 8, 21). For example, “Lot ... is a saintly and guiltless man; he is beyond reproach” (LW 3.280). This contrasts with Calvin who usually finds fault with the characters of Genesis, whereas “Luther seems to find faith and faithfulness, along with nobility tempered by suffering, wherever he turns” (Thompson, “Hagar” 224).

The story of the rivalry of Leah and Rachel to bear Jacob’s children, running from Genesis 29:16 to 30:24, with its mixture of deception (29:25), polygamy, favouritism (29:31), jealousy, concubines, drugs (30:14) and payment for conjugal relations (30:16) was problematic for a literal mode of interpretation and many earlier commentators had turned to allegory. Luther however strove to practise literal exegesis (Forde 244; Meyer 435). The repentance motif was not an option here, for at the low point (29:31) Rachel is oppressed, and God has pity on her distress, then the story advances to successive triumphs (for both wives) and there is no divine word against the competition or its methods. The only option is that Rachel is a hero of faith, and an edifying model for his student-pastors’ wives.



The lesson for Luther's hearers is faith in God's word, not the specific goals for which Sarah or Rachel exercised faith. Luther did not collapse the distance between ancient Israel and the New Testament, but noted "the external promises are like a shell; but the essential part of the nut ... is Christ and eternal life" (LW 3.149). Back then it was "enclosed in this shell ... of the material blessing concerning ... the descendants of Abraham." But "this temporal blessing is now at an end. For the shell has been opened and broken" (LW 3.150, also see 3.148). Luther agrees with the Fathers that the promise to Abraham must be spiritualized, for "the promise concerns the spiritual seed, that is, the believers, more than it does the physical descendants" (LW 3.152). Luther put his faith in NT promises, not in Israelite nation-building, or a second messianic birth, but this is explained by Luther only in a few places (as noted above), whereas his praise of the exemplary faith and life of the patriarchs and matriarchs extends throughout his commentaries. Mattox notes that although the messianic motive was past, "the promise of redemption ... imparted to motherhood generally a reflected glory" ("Eve" 467). Much of contemporary natalist retrieval quotes from Luther's OT commentaries without engaging this hermeneutic problem: the key imperative to biological reproduction ends after the one Messiah is born.

#### **Birth a sign of grace; barrenness a sign of wrath**

One of Provan's claims is that limiting one's offspring is a negation of the Genesis 1:28 blessing, for "God views childlessness or less children than possible as a negative occurrence, something which he uses as a punishment" (9). Provan does not claim that involuntary infertility is a curse, but he argues that birth control, being a self-inflicted temporary sterility, is "a bad and undesirable thing" and adds:

Luther had this to say about sterility. "...saintly women have always regarded childbirth as a great sign of grace. Rachel is rude and exceedingly irksome to her husband when she says: Give me children or I die! She makes it clear that she will die of grief because she sees that barrenness is a sign of wrath. And in Ps.127:3 there is a glorious eulogy of offspring: "Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward." Surely it is a magnificent name that children are the gift of God. Therefore Hannah laments so pitifully, and John's aged mother Elizabeth leaps for joy and exults: "The Lord has taken away my reproach." Thus when the world was still in a better state, barrenness was considered a sign of wrath; but childbirth was considered a sign of grace. (Provan 10 quoting LW 3.134)

However, immediately preceding Provan's extract is the word "Consequently" and the preceding sentences give Luther's reason why these women regarded childbirth as a "sign of grace" and infertility as a "sign of wrath." Provan ignores those and also misses the significance of the context of this quotation, which is in the middle of Luther's comments on the divine institution of circumcision in Genesis 17:10-11, where God "applies the law of circumcision to this so-called lewd member, which has to do with ... the propagation of all flesh ... God selects this member because he wants to point to original sin ... Yet this is not actually a condemnation; it is rather a threat and a display of wrath" (LW 3.136). Luther identifies circumcision as a "sign of wrath" through its bodily location in the "lewd member" which he linked to original sin. Similarly the curse on childbearing in Genesis 3:15 is a mitigation of divine wrath for "The woman's members were condemned to punishment, but they were not condemned to sterility" (LW 3.135; Meyer 433). Luther considers:

if God had merely wanted to be angry and to punish and not also to forgive and have compassion, He would have said: "You shall remain barren." ... Eve gained the sure hope of salvation, inasmuch as both a holy Seed had been promised and the blessing of giving birth and of multiplying had remained, which God did not take away. (LW 3.134)

Luther does not exclude the mundane reasons for desiring offspring but those are not his focus here. That her fertility persists despite the curse is reassuring for Eve as a sign of grace, that God is mitigating his punishment. This reassurance was also desired afresh by each OT matriarch since their fertility is evidence that God is merciful and forgiving, and later is also a sign that God is faithful to His covenant promises to Abraham. In the new covenant Christians look to a different sign of forgiveness: the Cross of Christ.

Provan continues by discussing Deuteronomy 7:12 in support of his point that a woman being barren is the reverse of the original blessing, and complains:

Yet in our culture, barrenness is "no big deal" and people are always attempting to tell sterile couples that "everything is all right." But everything is not all right! Listen to what Martin Luther had to say, commenting upon Rachel's great desire to have children: "... from this it is clear that the very saintly women were not lustful but were desirous of offspring and the blessing. For this was the cause of envy in Rachel, who, if she had been like other women whom our age has produced in large numbers, would have said: "What is it to me whether I bear children or not? Provided that I remain the mother of the household and have an abundance

of all other things, I have enough.” But Rachel demands offspring so much that she prefers death to remaining sterile . . . . Therefore she is an example of a very pious and continent woman whose only zeal and burning desire is for offspring, even if it means death . . . . this feeling is decidedly praiseworthy. “If I do not have children, I shall die” says Rachel. “I prefer being without life to being without children.” . . . [X] Consequently, she determines either to bear children or die. Thus later she dies in childbirth. This desire and feeling of the godly woman is good and saintly. (Provan 10-11 citing LW 5.328)

This use of Luther’s comment on Genesis 30:2 is defective. The worst problem is Provan’s ellipsis which I have marked [X].<sup>105</sup> The missing text is as follows:

There was no small reason for this desire, for Jacob undoubtedly proclaimed to both that he had the promise that the Blessed Seed would be born from him, and because of this proclamation the desire for acquiring offspring was kindled, especially in Rachel. (LW 5.328)

By omitting this Provan loses the gospel message Luther found in this narrative, which is central to his exegesis of it. Luther wanted to clarify what Rachel’s motive was, and also what it was not (lust). The messianic motive is repeated in Luther’s original text immediately after Provan’s quotation ends:

For they did not look at the shameful and wretched pleasure of the flesh in marriage. No, they looked at the blessing of offspring for the sake of the Promised Seed” (LW 5.328).

Provan mistakenly focuses on the temporary objects of faith, and also too readily commends imitation of the attitudes, lifestyle, and actions of the patriarchs of Genesis and their wives. Luther warned that the Hebrew Patriarchs “have an extraordinary call and impulse. You do not. Therefore when such accounts are presented, you must remember not to lay stress on the examples or deeds” (LW 3.292; also see Mattox, *Defender* 178). Although he was referring to other deeds the general principle holds that hearers should imitate the faith of the patriarchs rather than their specific actions.

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105. In general, and especially for an author as verbose as Luther, the use of ellipses is helpful but in this case Provan seems to have been unaware of the significance of section he excised.

## Luther's apocalyptic eschatology

In this section I move beyond Provan's appropriation of Luther to consider other natalist arguments and assess whether any can be legitimately found in Luther's thought. The viability of cornucopian, sectarian, or social natalist ideas finding support in Luther are all affected by his eschatology. Modern historians' debates about Luther's apocalypticism address questions such as whether he was exceptional among early Reformers, whether it controlled his theology, and whether his anticipation increased in his later years,<sup>106</sup> but that Luther's future horizon was short is a consensus (Parsons 628). Oberman and Barnes claim that apocalyptic expectation was central to Luther's theology. Nestingen considers "apocalypticism was the controlling factor in Luther's response to the challenges of his day" ("End" 257). Lohse claims it was not theologically central, but does not deny its presence in Luther's thinking (333). He admits that expectation of the end of the world was "more intense" among Europeans in the early 16th century than in earlier or later periods (33). Others have traced its rise in the late 15th century (Reid 56; Nestingen, "End" 204). It is possible Luther's apocalyptic language is merely conventional (Lohse 332-34), or that he refers to a "last day" which is existentially always close (Parsons 644). However, even if one grants that phrases like "the last hour has come" (LW 44.241), "the day of the Lord is drawing near" (LW 2.24), and "now at the end of the world" (LW 2.13) represent language of those types, there is other specific evidence for the imminence of Luther's expectation.

The first evidence is Luther's "self-understanding as an end-time prophet," and his later belief that the Papacy was the ultimate anti-Christ (Matheson, *Imaginative* 83; Cunningham and Grell 4). In a letter in 1545 Luther declared "I believe that we are the last trumpet which prepares for and precedes the advent of Christ" (Gritsch 276). Luther saw himself as a second Noah, and his lifetime as parallel to the last days before the Flood (Parsons 644). These convey his sense that the end of the world was close in time.

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106. For the historiography in Reformation studies of the terms apocalyptic, millennarian, chiliasm and eschatology see Darrell Reid (55).

The second is his statements about world chronology. Luther never predicted a date but he followed the tradition of dividing history into six millennia preceding Christ's second advent (Parsons 644). "The world is six thousand years old and thereafter it will break apart" (Gritsch 275). Luther's chronological treatise, *Supputatio annorum mundi*, published in 1541, identified the sixth millennium as an era of papal power after the spiritual "fall" of the church (Gritsch 275). Luther was unsure exactly when the church fell, but came to focus on the rise of the papacy and especially on Gregory I who began his reign in AD 590 (Reid 56). In a millennial scheme that might point to 1590 as a significant date, though an earlier or later date for the end was possible.

The third is his view that prophecies from the Bible (and Saxon folklore) were being fulfilled, and that signs of the end were appearing. Luther wrote in 1541 that "the last day must be at hand. For almost all the signs have now appeared" (Lohse 33). "The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in my Scriptures. All the firmaments and the course of the heavens are slowing down and approaching the end. For a whole year the Elbe has remained at the same level and this too is a portent" (LW 54.134). Commenting on Genesis, he discerned the "extreme old age of this world" (LW 6.188). Luther wrote in a letter in December 1544 to Jacob Propst: "It looks to me as if the world, too,<sup>107</sup> has come to the hour of its passing, and has become an old wornout coat ... Nothing good can be expected, therefore, except that the day of glory ... may be revealed" (LW 50.245). These words suggest an imminent end of the world.

I suspect that Luther's view on the proximity of the end fluctuated. It was influenced by his thought and personal circumstances, and was temporarily affected by contemporary events such as the Peasants' War in 1525 (Oberman, *Luther* 278). However his persistent belief, in common with many of his contemporaries, was that the horizon of the world's future was a few years rather than decades or centuries (Headley; Oberman, *Luther* 12). Sectarian natalism requires a long temporal horizon and would be alien to Luther for that reason alone.

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107. Luther is here drawing an analogy between his own old age and the world's decrepitude.

Luther believed that humankind's abilities and dominion had collapsed after the Fall, and also that since the Flood there had been progressive and irreversible decline in the Earth and humankind: "We may assume that the closer the world was to Adam's Fall, the better it was; but it has deteriorated from day to day until our times, in which live the dregs and, as it were, the ultimate dung of the human race" (LW 2.7; Barnes 32). Luther's comment on the collapse of Adam's dominion (cited earlier) is not amenable to a cornucopian view: "By contrast, today and always the whole creation is hardly sufficient to feed and support the human race. Therefore what this dominion consisted of we cannot even imagine" (LW 1.172). Luther, unlike the Hussites, did not expect the end of the age to bring earthly renewal, but rather the end of the world (Oberman, *Roots* 27). He believed that their Gospel proclamation would provoke a backlash from Satan that might hasten the last battle, and predicted that "the entire world will slide into obedience to the Antichrist ... It is not our job to hold it back" (Oberman, *Roots* 43, 33).

#### **Preserving the human species and society**

Luther was determined to reform churches and to amend the nation, in spite of the imminent end of the world. Oberman calls this an "interim ethic" of preserving society (*Roots* 35,36). It allowed room in his thought for a worldly pragmatism desiring sufficient reproduction for the survival of humankind, and the nation. Anyone born into the pre-modern situation of high premature mortality would, if concerned for society's welfare, advocate high fecundity. Social natalists go a step further and claim that a necessity to prevent the decline of population should have priority over individual preferences. It would be fair to identify Luther as a social natalist of this type, though it did not much occupy his attention.

Luther's praise of human fecundity must be set in demographic context. In the 16th century over a third of infants died before the age of five (Ozment 101), and there was significant mortality among children, young adults, and in every age cohort.<sup>108</sup> Before and during Luther's formative early years the population of Europe was lower than it had been two hundred years earlier. Numbers had begun falling around 1300, probably due to agricultural over-extension and small climate changes

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108. In demography a "cohort" is usually a five-year age range, for example 25 to 30.

(Bacci 38), even before the Black Death. Slow decline had continued into the 1400s, followed by stability until population began increasing around 1475 (Cunningham and Grell 14-15). That was the demographic situation into which Luther was born in 1483, and the context of his praise of high fertility. Abandoned farmland was still abundant and being reclaimed in his lifetime (Bacci 42, 88), evidence of the late medieval decline in the German population. Luther was also aware of contemporary discoveries of new territory overseas writing that “of late, many islands and lands have been discovered” (Lohse 16). The context of apparently empty lands overseas and spare land locally meant that any small increases in population which Luther might have anticipated could easily be accommodated.

Luther cites the need for temporal maintenance of humankind as a fundamental benefit of marriage. In his sermon at the wedding of Sigmund von Lindenau in 1545 he observed: “The human race would go out of existence” if it were not for marriage (LS 98). Commenting on a law in Deuteronomy (24:5) Luther observed: “It is fair that a bridegroom be granted a year with his bride ... that the commonwealth may increase through progeny and families” (LW 9.241). He says in *Table Talk*: “When we look backward and think about the past, marriage is not so bad, for by means of it the future and the world are maintained. For our parents ... lived out their faith inasmuch as they obeyed God’s command to raise children” (LS 125). Though he used it as an additional argument in favour of marriage, Luther does not seem much worried about population or extinction, and though the point appears in *Table Talk* and wedding sermons, he does not deploy it in his treatises against vows of celibacy. He does however turn to this point to explain though not excuse why Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19:30-38) resorted to incest:

Thus they devise this plan ... because of their extraordinary compassion for the entire human race ... Lot’s daughters thought: “God does not want to destroy the human race; He wants to preserve it. But now there is nobody left besides our father” ... Thus it is nothing but genuine concern for preserving the human race that troubles the saintly girls. (LW 3.280, 310)

As in other cases Luther charitably looks for ways to present the behaviour of the men and women of Genesis as models of faith whenever possible.

To modern ears the words “increase” and, especially, “multiply” bring to mind the rapid increase in total population experienced in the 20th century, but that was

not the concept in Luther's mind. In a sermon in January 1525 he preached that the purpose of childbirth is "so that the human race is maintained" (LS 95). He explicitly stated that Genesis 1:28 is the same ordinance in humankind as is active in all species therefore "the body of a Christian must fructify and multiply just like that of other human beings, birds, and all the animals, as it was created by God to do according to Gen.1:28" (LW 28.26). Luther did not mean that God intended all species to increase *absolutely* in successive generations, since it was commonly known that wild animal populations did not continuously rise decade after decade. Rather, the word multiply refers to reproductive efforts replacing the unremitting regular losses to death. Luther believed reproduction is put in all life to ensure the survival of species: "For when God once said (Gen.1:28): Be fruitful, that Word is effective to this day and preserves nature in a miraculous way" (LW 4.4). Luther treats the words "preserve" and "increase" as amounting to the same thing:

When God says: "It is not good that man should be alone" ... God is speaking of the common good or that of the species, not of personal good ... he was not yet in possession of the common good which the rest of the living beings who propagated their kind through procreation had. For so far Adam was alone; he still had no partner for that magnificent work of begetting and preserving his kind. Therefore "good" in this passage denotes the increase of the human race. (LW 1.115-6)

Luther shared in the common cultural desire to maintain the paternal lineage and family name. Around the time of his marriage in June 1525 he mentioned the various reasons why he was taking this step. Writing to his friend Nicholas von Amsdorf he referred to "my father's wish for progeny, which he so often expressed" (LW 49.117). Writing to John Ruhel he wrote that "I cannot deny my father the hope of progeny" (Bainton 290). In a letter to his father, prefixed to *Monastic Vows*, Luther presents the duty to provide grandchildren as a reason invalidating his vow of celibacy (LW 48.331). However he does not deploy this argument in his treatises: it is perhaps not presentable as a theological argument for reproduction. Luther also joked about becoming a patriarch with many children. *Table Talk* for April 1532 reports him saying:

"The time will come when a man will take more than one wife." The doctor's wife responded, "Let the devil believe that!" The doctor said, "The reason, Katy, is that a woman can bear a child only once a year while her husband can beget many." ... The doctor spoke thus in jest for a long time,



and finally the doctor's wife said, "Before I put up with this, I'd rather go back to the convent and leave you and all our children." (LW 54.153)

### **Nursery of state and church**

Marriage and reproduction have the potential to benefit not only civil society, but also the church. Luther pleaded that "marriage should be treated with honor; from it we all originate, because it is a nursery not only for the state but also for the church and the kingdom of Christ until the end of the world" (LW 1.240). He points out that bishops, the Pope and the Fathers all owe their existence to marriage. But there was no simple correlation. Neither state or church is blessed by mere biological increase unless the offspring are well brought up. In a sermon on marriage in 1519 Luther preached: "It is not enough, however, merely for children to be born ... Heathens, too, bear offspring," but parents must "raise children to the service, honor and praise of God and seek nothing else out of it, which unfortunately seldom happens" (LW 44.12). The implication is that a few children, disciplined as good citizens and educated in Scripture, is a better practice of parenthood than bearing many children but neglecting discipline and education.

The assumption that faith is inherited from natural parents is severely qualified in Luther's writings. Parents and children hang between heaven and hell. For the parents, "bringing up their children properly is their shortest road to heaven. In fact, heaven itself could not be made nearer or achieved more easily than by doing this work" (LW 44.12). But Luther continues:

By the same token, hell is no more easily earned ... than [by] spoiling children ... False natural love blinds parents so that they have more regard for the bodies of their children than they have for their souls ... "If you beat him with the rod you will save his life from hell" ... O what a truly noble, important, and blessed condition the estate of marriage is if it is properly regarded! O what a truly pitiable, horrible, and dangerous condition it is if it is not properly regarded! (LW 44.13)

In 1520 Luther repeated his warning to parents who fail to train children properly: "O how perilous it is to be a father or mother ... parents cannot earn hell more easily ... If they had not had children, perhaps they might have been saved" (LW 44.83, 86). That is only the parents' side. Even if they do well there is no automatic progression for their offspring from birth to salvation, for each one must believe.

The flesh has its gifts, but nothing is owed them except bread and water. Eternal life does not come to the children of the flesh; it comes to the children of the promises, that is, to those who believe ... God added a blessing for married people when He said: "Increase and multiply." But this is a physical blessing and is restricted to the filling of the earth. No matter how saintly a father and a mother are, this is nevertheless of no advantage to the children born to them. Nor are the children saved on this account. If they are to be saved, they must become children of the promise, and they themselves must believe the promise. (LW 4.52)

On the *protoevangelion*, the messianic prophecy perceived in Genesis 3:15, he comments that "without this promise procreation would indeed continue to go on among people, as well as among the other living beings, but it would be nothing else than a procreation to death" (LW 1.195). Luther's view that only a minority will be saved makes high reproduction ambivalent as a means to church growth. It may add to the population of hell as many, or more, as it adds to the population of heaven.

### **Conclusion**

Martin Luther is the most important character in the 16th century change in attitudes toward marriage and fertility in western Christianity. Although he had little to say about population or demography, he wrote about human fertility more extensively than any other early Protestant leader. He paved the way for modern natalism by his rhetorical exaltation of the biological family. Before Luther the primary model of ideal Christian leadership was Jesus with his twelve disciples, or celibate Paul, but after Luther a large family was the model for pastors, a model to be imitated by their congregations (Carlson, "Fruitful" 23). Luther provided a biblical and theological basis for changing the relative balance of esteem given to marriage and celibacy, which had limited the influence of pragmatism and social natalism in Christianity since its beginning.<sup>109</sup> The effect went beyond Protestantism, for example Carlson claims that "the shock of the Reformation" led to a shift in Catholic thought on the family and reproduction (18).

There is material in Luther's writings amenable to natalism, but much of it arises from other motivations. The history of early Lutheranism shows his writings

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109. There were of course other sources for the rise of "family values" including a new Renaissance ideal of children and family, and social and economic changes.

have always been susceptible to conflicting receptions. Similarly, in recent debates on gender “there is plenty of ammunition in Luther’s words for both sides” (LS 8). Provan’s use of Luther often misleads because he ignores the historical, theological, and hermeneutical context. Carlson by contrast shows awareness of context and his presentation is largely fair, though he sometimes mistakes Luther’s rhetoric, for example on the rarity and impossibility of celibacy (“Children” 20).

Luther’s presentation of an absolute law of nature derived from Genesis 1:28 that makes celibacy impossible should be treated with caution. His willingness to exempt those gifted for celibacy, despite the various wild statistical claims he makes about its rarity, left room for him to treat the matter differently elsewhere. Luther in practice allowed a Christian liberty that is lacking in Provan’s command ethic. Also the later doctrines of Lutheran theologians about the “orders of creation” should not be read back into the occasional polemics by Luther.

His eschatology and secular pessimism puts Luther far from cornucopian ideology, and his short temporal horizon left no time for sectarian natalism. Insofar as Luther had any interest in demography (the topic is not prominent in his thought) it was a common secular pragmatism desiring the perpetuation of family name and human community, though even that was tempered by his eschatology. Luther is amenable to the idea that obligation to perpetuate the nation through reproduction outweighs personal goals such as the wish for a retired life of prayer and study. Very few earlier Christian writers adhered to this view (though it was common among Stoics and other early non-Christian writers) so it is fair to regard Luther as a forerunner of social natalism.

## Chapter 4. The ancient Near Eastern context

This chapter will consider first the ancient Near Eastern background: cultural, demographic, economic, political, and religious. Second, it considers the canonical and theological contexts of the most popular verses in order to identify the range of plausible original meanings. Third, it compares modern natalist arguments with features of OT thought. Finally, it examines recent scholarly ventures in Christian application of some significant fruitful verses.

Most attention here will be given to Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127:3-5, but with a view to wider OT canonical contexts. My catalogued natalist sources between them make 264 references to the Old Testament, and these cover 27 OT books.<sup>110</sup> Just over half (139) are to the Pentateuch, including 84 to Genesis. “Be fruitful and multiply” is the most popular text (as noted in chapter 2), but the patriarchal narratives account for over half (46) of references to Genesis, and there are 35 references spread across Deuteronomy. Psalm 127 is the second most popular text, but there are 109 mentions of 75 other texts from outside the Pentateuch. Therefore attention will be given to other texts, to the patriarchs, and the whole story of Israel.

The various parts of the Old Testament were written in the ancient Near East sometime between 1300 and 300 BC. For this topic an important part of the canon is the Pentateuch, and especially Genesis. Scholars usually date this (or its final form) after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian empire in 586 BC, or after the return of exiles to Palestine, but some place it earlier under the Davidic monarchy. Tradition ascribes it to Moses, who wrote it in the wilderness *circa* 1300 BC. Few scholars accept that traditional dating, but most agree that early narratives and law codes were incorporated by later redactors (Ska 192). This dating is very wide but the cultural context changed little across the period. Even the political context, which did change, had an element of continuity in that one empire or another was always in view. My suggestions about context therefore do not require precise dating and are not tied to disputed theories about the texts’ provenance.

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110. The only OT books not cited in my catalogued sources are Esther, Song of Songs, Daniel, and nine of the Minor Prophets. Nine other books are cited only once.

## Cultural context

The writers of the Old Testament were scribes and priests. The political concerns of an elite based in centres of power will be considered later, but around 95% of ancient Israelites were farmers (Blenkinsopp 54). The OT writers were aware of agrarian concerns, and not far removed from them, so it is helpful to consider the contribution of material culture to OT ideas about fertility. In brief, ancient agrarian cultures normally valued numerous offspring, but the special circumstances of early Israel encouraged an accentuated version of this esteem of fecundity.

Israelites during their early formative period *c.* 1200-1000 BC, lived in the Palestinian highlands (Dever 196). Other peoples filled the coast and lowland valleys such as Jezreel, but the semi-arid central highlands were less desirable. Archaeology suggests these early Israelites grew cereals, grapes and olives, and kept livestock (Meyers, “Family” 3). Their land was mostly sloping, with rare flat areas, and rocky with poor soil. It was scrub woodland but deficient in valuable timber trees. These highlands demanded more labour than lowlands, to clear scrub (Joshua 17:18), remove stones, to build terraces when initially preparing land for farming, and also for continuing maintenance. The result was an “extraordinary intensification” of demand for labour, and so a heightened requirement for “large families” (Meyers, “Procreation” 581), above the ancient norm.

Ancient demographics (mortality rates) added to the need for numerous births. Death stalked all age cohorts, but especially infants with almost half dying before the age of five (Meyers, “Family” 19). The typical family unit of two parents had two to four children (Blenkinsopp 51), and this produced increase. Around 1200 BC there were 20,000 highland Israelites, rising to 55,000 by 1000 BC (Borowski 8). Over two hundred years the average annual increase was 0.5%, but ethnographic comparison suggests the reality would have been unstable fluctuation. Also with 80% of people living in isolated settlements of less than 100 people (Meyers, “Family” 12), some communities would occasionally encounter crises in which reproduction temporarily threatened to be insufficient for local viability.

As in other ancient cultures, numerous offspring benefited parents. Though the period of infancy was an economic loss, ethnography suggests that at age five years a

child of subsistence farmers would help in tasks such as food preparation, gardening, water-carrying, wood-gathering, and guarding livestock from predators. As a child grew the range of tasks and the hours worked increased to a break-even point, and then profit. By age thirteen near-adult work was done (Meyers, “Family” 27).<sup>111</sup> This meant child survival and strength were more important than simply maximising the number of births. Spacing between births was desirable, not only for the mother’s sake but also for the child’s robustness. The main method used was prolonged breast feeding, which reduces fecundity. Normal practice in ancient Israel was to nurse infants for around three years (King and Stager 41). Extended nursing is assumed in the story of Hannah waiting until Samuel was weaned before delivering him to the temple (1 Samuel 1:22), and the specification of a three year old bull as redemption offering suggests Samuel’s age (Blenkinsopp 98).

Daughters were typically as helpful as sons while children, but at maturity most married and moved to another man’s household where they worked. The bride-price (Exodus 22:16) compensated the father, and varied by status. Laban’s daughter was exchanged for seven years’ labour from Jacob (Genesis 29:20). In the case of a man compelled to pay the bride-price as compensation for rape, the specified fifty shekels (five years’ wages) may be a typical amount (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). Sons were even more valuable. After marriage, they continued to be affiliated to the *bēt ‘ab* (father’s household) and owed obedience. In the nearby Ugaritic culture, a list of a son’s duties to his father include roof patching and clothes washing (Blenkinsopp 71). Adult sons could support their father in disputes, which some identify as the background of Psalm 127:4,<sup>112</sup> which is discussed below.

Parents expected help in old age from children (Proverbs 23:22), which is reflected in the linking of long life with the commandment to “honour” father and

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111. Meyers suggests this may be reflected in Leviticus 27 where lower value is assigned to people aged under five (“Procreation” 585).

112. That psalm “deals ... exclusively with the sons” (Kraus 455). Though in a few texts referring to infants *bānîm* can be gender-neutral, in Psalm 127 the common male referent is appropriate (Davidson 419, Fleming 441, Dahood 224). Among translations, the RSV and NIV agree on “sons” but others including the ASV and ESV put “children,” guided perhaps by a desire to make the text palatable to modern readers.

mother (Exodus 20:12). Edesio Sánchez claims that the fifth commandment was aimed at adult children and constitutes a “requirement to take care of elderly parents” (40). Given that most daughters would be married, perhaps living elsewhere and certainly with duties to another family’s head, it was the sons and their wives who would be responsible to care for elderly parents.

Sons provide continuity for the line of male descendants. That was probably linked to belief that dead ancestors benefited from regular memorial rituals by male heirs living on the inherited land where the dead rested (Brichto 28), but this cultural practice left little trace in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 26:14). There is a desire for proxy immortality through heirs (Psalm 128:6). Sons had a duty to bury the father (Genesis 35:29) and to remember their forefathers (Brichto 21). The perpetuation of memorials depended on descendants retaining the land. Another kind of memory is the father’s name (which might be recited in genealogy) again depending on the male line: “bless the boys and in them let my name be carried on” (Genesis 48:16).<sup>113</sup> The cultural importance of this is shown by the Levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5) which in case a man dies without an heir obliges his brother to marry the widow and count the first offspring as belonging to the dead brother. Given pre-modern rates of premature mortality, securing a high probability of one son surviving to produce a grandson required at least three male births.<sup>114</sup>

### Political context

OT writers shared a concept of a distinct *‘am* (people) named Israel, belonging in a particular land as a *gôy* (nation).<sup>115</sup> The political context would differ depending on dating of the texts but there are common features. Moses looks forward to the

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113. In the case of Zelophehad (Numbers 36:2-12) who dies with no son, only daughters, there is an emergency provision that the daughters may inherit his land on condition that they marry within their father’s clan.

114. Even that number is barely enough in the story of Judah who has three adult sons (and perhaps others who died in infancy) but two die without progeny (Genesis 38), and only the third son produces a grandson (1 Chronicles 4:21).

115. This was unlike modern nationalism. In any case it is unclear how much ancient Israelite farmers shared the national interest of OT writers. Their horizon may rarely have extended beyond their *mišpāhā* (village or clan).

nation living in the land, and post-exilic writers look back to the time when the people was not subject to any empire. Writers in exile look forward in hope of return to the land, but also with an eye to their exiled community. Babylonia and other ancient empires dealt with conquered peoples by enslaving the survivors and deporting some or all to other locations in the empire. Exiles were scattered around the empire, which exacerbated the perception of their being few. They were unfree, often unable to own land, and vulnerable to oppression. They lacked self-determination, though they had leaders. One important concern for those leaders was preservation of a distinct “national” religious identity.

It is unlikely that OT writers worried about perpetuating the human species. The survival of *Homo sapiens* had not been precarious since the Pleistocene, beyond memory. More importantly, humankind did not exist as one united community but rather as many rival peoples. The concern of each was national survival, often under threat from other nations and empires. There was a subsidiary interest in preserving the constituent parts of Israel. Communal efforts to rescue the tribe of Benjamin from near extinction are described in Judges 21. Whatever the later reality of the tribes, continuity of each clan was valued. A basic concern was maintaining clan numbers, and increasing. Elites with a wider perspective were concerned at the national scale. Rates of fertility and premature mortality varied little across the ancient world. The normal pattern was a slow increase punctuated by periodic reversals, usually due to plague or war. After the Assyrian war in 701 BC part of Judea’s population increase of previous centuries had been lost (Borowski 8). Human fertility could be a symbol of national hopes (Hosea 9:11). The exiles in Babylonia were exhorted to “increase and do not decrease” (Jeremiah 29:6). During an earlier captivity in Egypt the Israelites are pictured becoming “many and mighty” (Exodus 1:9-10), which set a good example for later exiles.

Rearing sufficient offspring to offset normal mortality and replace the current generation demanded continuing effort, but political concerns were more pressing and demanded higher fertility. In the ancient Near East rivalry between nations for political existence and dominance required fertility partly to offset deaths in war but mainly to match or outnumber other peoples. The Canaanites as archetypal enemy are depicted as “a great host, in number like the sand” (Joshua 11:4), and there was a



perceived need for a large number of warriors to defeat them. Large sections of the Pentateuch consist of lists counting each clan's contribution to the number of "all who were able to go to war" (Numbers 1:20).

Surrounded by empires, Judea had good reason to fear the political extinction that later happened. Ryan Byrne argues that "social reproduction ... represented a priority of state as well as family in Iron Age Judah" (145), and claims that the production of fertility statuettes in Judea should be understood in the context of Assyrian aggression which had extinguished nearby city-states (Arpad, Hamath and Damascus), and the northern kingdom (Samaria). Judean towns also fell, and even Jerusalem was besieged (2 Kings 18: 9, 17). Archeologists have retrieved from sites across Judea of the 8th and 7th centuries BC more than eight hundred statuettes of a woman ready to lactate, and Byrne judges that these "pillar figurines portray the fertile archetype, an ideal model of the dutiful Judean woman, wife, mother, the progenitress of Judeans" (143). Perhaps at times of defeat and loss there was a stronger emphasis on reproduction.

Demands of war and rivalry that could generate a pro-fertility attitude fits different datings of the text equally well. Moses led a host of landless ex-slaves hoping to conquer and occupy Canaan. During the kingdom the emphasis was on holding land, and training sufficient sons to defend it. Writers in exile would regret the kingdom's defeat, and belonged to a minority that was sometimes competing with other minorities, or dreaming of triumphs like that of Mordecai, when "other Jews in the king's provinces gathered themselves together ... and slew their foes" (Esther 9:16). So dating is not a problem for this argument.

Beyond national interest, parts of the Old Testament may voice the specific interests of rulers. Whether and how particular texts are polemical in supporting or critiquing ruling powers is hotly debated. For example, Philip Davies identifies many texts as the voice of a ruling class mediated by scribes (21), whereas others discern anti-monarchy voices. Attitudes to the institution of monarchy, the Davidic dynasty, the northern kingdom, and post-exilic Jerusalem governors authorised by Persia, are certainly part of the background for the Old Testament.

Kings had a dynastic interest in fathering many sons. For royal succession among Israelites primogeniture was not the most important principle: a king could

choose the next king from among his sons. Apart from common mortality, princes faced special attrition. Some might be killed due to fraternal rivalry, like Amnon (2 Samuel 13:29), or disloyalty, like Absalom (2 Samuel 15:6). Others might be deemed unfit to rule due to incompetence, insanity, or physical disability, like Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 4:4), and in changing politics yet others might turn out to be unsuitable diplomatically, if born of a wife from a broken foreign alliance, or a wife from a local family which had later fallen from favour. The writers of some fruitful verses in Proverbs and Psalms may have a royal audience in mind.

Ambitious kings wanted their people to increase in number because “a large population is a king’s glory” (Proverbs 14:28). More people meant more tax and forced labour for royal projects (1 Samuel 8), and enabled a king to be grander. Solomon rejoiced that “you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust” (2 Chronicles 1:9), and he conscripted 153,600 people to build a temple and a palace (2 Chronicles 2:2). Another text records 183,300 labouring at Solomon’s projects in various ways (1 Kings 5:13-16). Joab counted 1.3 million men owing military service to the king (2 Samuel 24:9). Archaeology suggests the numbers are unrealistically high, but they show aspirational ideals.

OT writers had some awareness of demography. At a popular level, farmers breeding animals (Genesis 30:31-41) knew demographic patterns. Casual observation of birds and other wild animals would reveal many births with many dying young. The degree of excess varied greatly: some species’ numbers periodically soar and crash, for example locusts and frogs (Exodus 8:13; 10:15). Other species seem fairly stable over many generations. Though it is easier to perceive demographic patterns in creatures with short lifespans, they also knew human demography: for example, that women bore many babies who died in their first year or as children. They might see an extended family living on the same land as they had for generations and deduce that numbers had not much risen. Scribes and rulers shared that popular knowledge, but also knew tax records, and perhaps old censuses. OT texts include genealogies, enumeration of clans, and they mention royal efforts to count people with a view to taxation, labour (1 Kings 5:13), and military recruitment.

## **Ideas about reproduction**

The fruitful verses should be interpreted in their immediate literary context, their canonical context, and the larger framework of OT theology. The canonical and theological investigation cannot be confined to Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 (which might be regarded as addressed to humankind universally) for two reasons. First, because the natalist sources do not confine their reception to Genesis 1-11: out of 264 references to the Old Testament only 37 are to those early chapters. All natalists refer to texts outside Genesis, even if for the least prolific quoters that is just the Psalms. Second, because the primeval history is not independent but part of the Pentateuch, and the canon. OT theology suggests that verses from the early chapters are thematic for the narrative from Genesis onward, Joshua to Kings, and beyond.

The sinful and defective character of humankind is depicted in Genesis, and God's response is to create a holy nation. The chosen instrument is one man and his seed established in a particular land. The worship of YHWH, embodied in religious practices, will endure through the matrix of this nation. The foundation is divine promises to Abraham, repeated to Isaac, Jacob, and the Israelites. Abraham's heirs will be his genetic offspring (15:4), they will be very numerous (13:16), and will cohere as a "great nation" (12:2). They will receive a land (12:7), good pasture and fertile fields, and will spread out across it (28:13), to fill and subdue it. In all this God promises that "I will be with you" (26:2), to bless, to prosper and keep secure (28:13), to deliver from oppressors and defeat enemies. OT scholars synthesize those promises in various ways. David Clines identifies "three elements: posterity, divine-human relationship, and land" (30). Desmond Alexander sees descendants and land as prerequisites of nationhood (84). This agenda requires a number of related elements, of which one is posterity, and within posterity one aspect is quantity. Israelite fecundity is only part of a larger project.

## **Integrated and sequential**

Land is an integral feature of the promise, since in the pre-modern world a people increasing in number requires more land (Numbers 26:54; 33:54). Norman Whybray observes that for ancient peoples in the Near East the "search for living space was an essential condition of the good life" (5). The promise of numerous

descendants is accompanied by a promise of land (Genesis 12:7; 15:5,7). Similarly, when Abraham is promised that his seed will be as numerous as dust, he is also promised that they will be able to *prtʒ*, to spread west, east, north and south (28:14). A repeated theme is that Israel will be fruitful and become many “in the land” (Genesis 41:52; 47:27; 48:4; Deuteronomy 6:3). Though Jacob’s extended family grow to number seventy (Genesis 46:27) this was far short of the nation promised to Abraham. Only after they are given the land of Goshen (Genesis 47:6) do the three verbs *prh*, *rbh*, and *ml’* (be fruitful, multiply, and fill) occur together (Exodus 1:7). In the wilderness the people are sustained by manna but it is not an enduring solution. When the promise is remembered at Mount Sinai, the verb *rbh* and noun *ʾrtz* (land) are linked together (Exodus 32:13). Land was a prerequisite enabling the sons of Israel to be fruitful and multiply to become a nation.

A progression, a changing balance in relative importance, has been observed across the Pentateuch. The primary element in Genesis 12-50 is posterity, whereas covenant dominates Exodus and Leviticus, and land is highlighted in Numbers and Deuteronomy (Clines 30). Between the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers the promise of offspring is recalled only once (Exodus 32:13). The offspring element reappears in Deuteronomy; one would not expect it to disappear completely because being fruitful and many is a continuous task. Due to normal mortality it must be renewed each generation. To keep the land filled with the living requires persistent reproduction and if it ever slacks the land would quickly become empty. Continued references after origins narratives do imply endless fertility but not necessarily continuous growth. The birth of Israel, and the subsequent stages of its national life is an historical process and the relative importance of the elements varies according to situation. Joshua has the whole land to fill so the situation is like that of Adam or Noah. When he is old there remains room for growth because much land had still not been occupied by Israel (Joshua 13:1; Exodus 23:30).

### **Quantity**

A large quantity of descendants is part of the plan. God promises offspring as numerous as the stars, sand or dust. All these metaphors extravagantly picture a large number. Moses at Sinai encourages Israel that God “has multiplied you ... as stars” but he looks to a future in which they will be “a thousand times more” (Deuteronomy

1:10-11). Rhetorically there seems to be no upper limit in view, but the number is comparative. Israel may be a “great nation” (Deuteronomy 4:6) but it seeks to drive out and subdue larger and stronger peoples (Deuteronomy 7:17; 11:23) and that is a reason why they keep hoping for greater numbers.

Building a holy nation requires not merely quantity of offspring but also unity, identity, and religious loyalty, which are all linked to divine covenant. Whenever there is a choice between these qualities and quantity, the former are prioritised. Abraham has many sons, Isaac has two sons, but in each generation only one “child of promise” is needed (Bratton 84). Attempts to build a holy nation including the extra sons would not yield a greater result. When at Sinai the Israelites turn to a golden idol, God’s first proposal is to eliminate them and rebuild his nation from Moses alone (Exodus 32:10). As it turns out God relents and instead commands that only 3000 unrepentant men be slain (Exodus 32:28). In the wilderness (Numbers 16:21) and in Israel’s later history the strategy of pruning back to a few people continues to be a thinkable option. There are incidents in which loss of numbers is shown as necessary to maintain national holiness. For example, two hundred and fifty dissident leaders are slain by fire, and the family encampments of Korah, Dathan and Abiram together with “their wives, children and little ones” are swallowed alive into *Sheol* (Numbers 16:31-33, NIV).

Though quantity is relativized none of this suggests any virtue in limiting fertility because the pruning is done after birth. It is amenable to a lottery natalism that gives birth to many in a hope that some will turn out to be “godly offspring.” The case of Abraham is different, with a revelation before any child is born that the nation will be built only from the son promised to Sarah. Despite this Abraham, due to his unbelief, fathers Ishmael by Hagar (and later six sons by Keturah) but sends them all far away (Genesis 21:10; 25:6) because the holy nation must be built only through Isaac the child of Sarah.

### **Birth or covenant?**

Ancient nations were not purely extended families and many Israelites were not descendants of Jacob, including significant members such as Uriah the Hittite. Genesis emphasises this and Abraham’s household, the first *bêt ‘ab*, is numerous but not kin-based. Abram’s heir for many years was a servant, Eliezer of Damascus

(15:2). Abraham circumcises all of his non-kin household, which is the sign of membership in Israel. Later, national identity was not strictly ethnic as non-kin were often incorporated into Israel by marriage. Also *gerim* (strangers and resident aliens) could join Israel (Isaiah 14:1), and in theory a whole clan of *gerim* could affiliate to Israel without any marriage connection to descendants of Jacob.

On the other hand, some OT writings express the idea that ancient Israel is essentially a kin group, built and maintained through birth. Abraham's heir will come "out of your own loins" (Genesis 15:4, ESV). Often an ideal is presented in which the hierarchy of kinship groups, *bêt 'ab* (household), *mišpāhā* (clan), and *šēbēt* (tribe), constitute the people (Joshua 7:14; 1 Samuel 10:19). In genealogies every clan is assigned genetic descent from Jacob, and the whole nation is portrayed as consisting of biological descendants of the people who entered the land after the exodus. The whole nation is called the "sons of Israel" (e.g. Genesis 50:25). Some texts suggest national endogamy, for example forbidding marriages between Israelites and people from Canaanite nations (Deuteronomy 7:3). The question whether Israel was and is to be built from biological reproduction, or by chosen adherence, is an unresolved tension in the Old Testament.

The nation-building promises were essentially for Israel. A few texts extend the blessing to Abraham's other descendants, notably Ishmael (Genesis 17:20). Apart from these no promise of fecundity is directed explicitly to *goyim*, the other nations. Even within Israel, the promise is only for keepers of the covenant. A prophet asks YHWH to give disloyal Israelites a "miscarrying womb and dry breasts" (Hosea 9:14). The people are warned that if they break the covenant God will "bereave you of your children" (Leviticus 26:22). Biological descent from Jacob did not guarantee loyalty to the national covenant, nor continuity of offspring.

### **Genesis 1:28**

The divine blessing on humankind in Genesis 1:28 includes five imperative verbs: be fruitful (*prh*), be many (*rbh*), fill (*ml'*), subdue (*kbs*), and rule or have dominion (*rdh*). Since 1970, in response to claims that reception of "subdue" and "dominion" provided an excuse for exploitation of nature, scholars have devoted much attention to the last two verbs. Far less attention has been given to the first three: "God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth."

The verb *prh* is associated with the ability to give birth, the opposite of the closed womb that afflicted Sarah and Rachel. The verb *rbh* means to be “many” or “much” or “great” and its usage later in the canon often refers broadly to prosperity. For example when the “oppressors of the poor” (Proverbs 22:16) grow richer the verb *rbh* is used. Biological reproduction and number is part of its meaning, but the 16th century decision to translate it as “multiply” here (though not often elsewhere) may convey to modern readers a misleading impression of an exclusive interest in quantity of offspring rather than human flourishing.

The verb *ml'* in Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 denotes spatial extension of population across the face of the land. It shares its object *'rtz* (earth or land) with the verb *kbs* (subdue), and all other biblical texts combining the verb *kbs* and object *rtz* (Numbers 32:22, 29; Joshua 18:1; 1 Chronicles 22:18), refer to Israelites defeating Canaanites and consolidating their control of the land (McKeown 72), and Genesis echoes that. Similarly *ml'* here refers to occupying land, and to fill is not a once-only event as a land may be filled but then after catastrophes such as war or plague one or more parts might be depopulated or empty (Ezekiel 36:38), like some Judean towns in the 7th century, so “fill the land” was not only a past event but a recurring imperative. There is also a numerical connotation where it is reported that post-exilic settlers were too few to fill the city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 7:4).

It may also be polemic against aNE fertility cults. John Hartley suggests that aNE religions “believed that fertility rites practiced at local shrines enabled their lands, flocks and wives to produce” (49). Victor Hamilton observes that such rites were often associated with the retelling of creation stories (139). Westermann claims that Genesis 1:28 (which may be derived from a traditional marriage blessing) is designed to warn hearers seeking fertility not to seek help from other gods, because fertility is YHWH’s gift, and He gave all life the capacity to reproduce at its origin so no subsequent ritual is needed (*Genesis* 161). A related but speculative idea is that 1:28 rebukes a practice of “ritualized enthronement of a king, often accompanied by the rites of sacred marriage” which “guaranteed fertility and prosperity” so this verse is “a deliberate rejection of the fertility cult” (Cohen 44).

The verbs *prh* with *rbh* and *ml'* occur together as a triplet only four times (Genesis 1:22, 28; 9:1; Exodus 1:7). The first three are moments of origin, and the

imperatives are addressed to nonhuman species and to humankind, or to Noah and his sons, so they are linked to creation. The last is a report of their fulfilment in the land of Goshen in Egypt, indicating that God's blessing and covenant stays with them outside the promised land.

The verb pair *prh* and *rbh* occurs in twelve other verses (Genesis 8:17; 9:7; 17:20; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4; Leviticus 26:9; Jeremiah 3:16; 23:3; Ezekiel 36:11). This pattern, with most in Genesis, indicates an emphasis on *prh* and *rbh* at the origins and formation of the nation, and its recall as a promise of restoration after the depletion and dispossession of war and exile. It is spoken by God to the patriarchs at difficult points in their lives, as reassurance. The four instances outside Genesis offer hope of future success. The people will increase in the land if they obey God's law (Leviticus 26:9); Jeremiah pictures revival if the people turn to God (3:16; 23:3; and Ezekiel links it with "waste places rebuilt" (36:11). Here the offer of fertility and prosperity functions as a "carrot" to encourage the people to choose loyalty to YHWH, and to seek religious and moral reformation.

### **Genesis 1-11**

Many readers suppose the first eleven chapters stand outside the thematic sweep of Genesis to Kings, are universal in scope, and have a continuing application to the whole species of humankind rather than just to Israel. However, sin's history complicates that simplicity. From Genesis 3:16 reproduction is under curse as well as blessing. From the perspective of OT theology human endeavour is ambivalent, and fertility is not exempt. The Flood story begins with allusions to 1:28, "when men began to multiply on the land" (6:1), and then in 6:5 we hear that *adam* (humankind) has become "great" (the noun form of *rbh*) but ironically it is "wickedness" that has multiplied. The first use of *ml'* after chapter 1 is when God sees that the Earth has become "filled with violence" (6:11, 13). This suggests numbers are not the highest priority and there is discrimination between acceptable and unacceptable. This is based simultaneously on God's s/election and on the quality of human behaviour and character. There are two lines of ancestry, from Cain and Seth. The generations of multiplication after Cain (4:17-22) might seem to fulfil 1:28, but the Cainite line is doomed, and every one of its offspring is destroyed by God's flood, exposing all their mothers' labours as futile.



Seth's line is more promising, for some call on the name of the Lord (4:26), and Enoch "walked with God" (5:22), but even so after nine generations of birth and multiplication only one man, Noah, is deemed good enough and fit to be allowed to survive. In each generation of the Sethite genealogy (5:6-31) the eldest son is named, and these are the lineage of Noah. However for each of the nine generations it also records that "after he became the father of [a named son] ... he had other sons and daughters" (5:7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 26, 30). These other branches are the great bulk of the Sethite lineage, but are as futile as the Cainites.<sup>116</sup> The divine destruction of "all flesh" annihilates all those Sethites (half of the human race) except the one "righteous man" (6:9) Noah and his household.

#### **Is disobedience of "be fruitful and increase" thematic?**

Some exegetes suggest the central recurring sin of humankind in Genesis 1-11 is disobedience of the commands of 1:28. In line with this idea, the sins of Adam, Cain, "the sons of God," the men alive before the Flood, and Ham and Canaan, were all read by some rabbis as offences against natural reproduction (Cohen 60). Isaac Kikawada suggests Adam hid from God (3:10) because he feared reproduction (Kikawada and Quinn 68). Primeval sin is also construed as sexual acts that were non-generating or misgenerating, for example unfruitful modes of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and incest. Cohen seems persuaded by some "rabbinic homilies" which argue that "Noah's contemporaries incurred the punishment of the flood because of ... their refusal to fulfill the procreative mandate" (78).

However the sexual offences (if they are such) here concern transgressions of boundaries (Genesis 6:4), disrespect for parents, breaking of marriage, and incest, more than reproduction. For those who seek a thematic sin in Genesis 1-11, better candidates are hubris and violence. Genesis 3 narrates a theft of godlike knowledge, and before the Fall of Babel men want to make a "name" for themselves.<sup>117</sup> Violence is the sin of Cain (4:8) and the same sin is identified as the provocation that brings the Flood (6:11), the *hamas* (violence) of all flesh.

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116. Except for the wives they provided for Noah's lineage.

117. And "name" or "renown" also features before the Flood (6:4).

Few biblical scholars agree with Kikawada that the key sin of Genesis 1-11 is infertility, a refusal to be fruitful and many. However with regard to one text many scholars do consider that resistance to the cultural mandate is a thematic sin. The offence at Babel is identified as disobedience of the imperative to fill, and their scattering (11:8) is construed as God forcing the Babelites to fill the land (Wenham, *Genesis* 240). Kaminski convincingly demolishes this interpretation (31). The verb used in the Babel narrative is not *ml'* but instead *pws* (scatter) which has a negative connotation and would remind readers of Jerusalem's fall and the scattering of its people into exile and *diaspora*. Babel, like Eden and the Flood, reflects on God's judgments. Whereas *ml'* denotes occupation in strength with dominion over territory, a prospect that any ambitious ancient people (like those at Babel) would welcome, *pws* instead denotes a scattering in weakness.

#### **Genesis as polemic against *Atrahasis*?**

Some commentators discern a sharp contrast in views on human fertility between biblical and ancient Near Eastern culture, and claim that Genesis includes polemic against the 18th century BC Babylonian epic *Atrahasis*. In that writing, the lesser gods complain about their work farming and maintaining canals, so humans are created as labourers. Men however multiply and become too noisy. The gods try to reduce human exuberance with plague, drought, and a famine, but these fail and they unleash a flood to wipe out humankind. They soon regret this because they need human service, and are pleased to discover that the god Enki warned a man named Atrahasis to build a boat. Enki then proposes less drastic measures to restrain human population growth in future: "Let there be among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear. Let there be among the peoples the Pasittu-demon to snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it." Ronald Hendel identifies divine strategies limiting human population: removing immortality or preventing its acquisition, reducing human lifespan, the establishment of categories of women who are not child-bearing, barrenness, and infant mortality (24). There would still be occasional disasters of famine, plague and war to regulate population, but the gods will not again seek to annihilate humankind.

William Moran identifies "be fruitful and multiply" after the flood (Genesis 9:1) as a "conscious rejection" of *Atrahasis*' presentation of the "limitation of man's

growth” as a remedy for disorder (61). Anne Kilmer similarly argues that whereas *Atrahasis* calls for man to “limit his increase ... the biblical text indicates the opposite command” (174). Isaac Kikawada argues that in Genesis “God, far from punishing man for population growth, is rather ordering him ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’ ... this command ... was argumentative, almost polemical, in its original context” (38-39).

Kikawada goes further than Kilmer and asserts: “Population growth is from the very beginning of the Genesis primeval history presented as an unqualified blessing ... Genesis 1-11 ... argues in favour of ... unlimited human reproduction” (51-52). Kikawada ascribes to “the author” his theological reading that to become fully the image of God one must reproduce biologically:

the creative motion of God has as its highest product his reproduction of himself according to his own kind ... Mankind, to live fully, to be the image and likeness of God, must exercise his dual capacities ... reproduce and move ... If he is to reproduce to his fullest, he must be willing to give up his sedentary way of life ... *Atrahasis* argues that ... mankind should curb its reproductive drive ... The Hebrew author responds that procreation is God’s greatest command to us, our greatest blessing ... What about overpopulation? To this civilized question the Hebrew gives a nomadic reply (79-80).

This is based on a contrast between nomadic and settled viewpoints, in which nomads solve overcrowding by migration and dispersion, whereas settled farming people respond either with fatalism (the gods will reduce us), or by planting colonies, or genocidal conquest. Kikawada claims that “*Atrahasis* offers population control as the solution to urban overcrowding; Genesis offers dispersion, the nomadic way of life. Population growth is from the very beginning of the Genesis primeval history presented as an unqualified blessing” (51). Jacob Milgrom, reviewing Kikawada’s work, suggests “the existence of a nomadic ideal anywhere in the Bible must be flatly denied” (Milgrom 373). The culture of the OT writers was not nomadic.<sup>118</sup> Even if traditional authorship is granted, the wilderness years were only a brief interval between centuries of settled life in Goshen and Canaan. Archaeology shows

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118. Even if OT writers had such an outlook, typically nomads also experience constraints on population. Nomads often live on marginal land because the fertile land has been occupied by settled peoples.

that the first Israelite settlements, in the Judean highlands, were primarily agricultural from their beginning (Meyers 3).

Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues convincingly that Genesis' main equivalent to the remedies proposed in *Atrahasis* are laws to stop violently shed blood polluting the land. With regard to "be fruitful and multiply" she makes two assertions: it is a "conscious rejection of the idea that the cause of the flood was overpopulation and that overpopulation is a serious problem" (152). I agree with the first clause but not the second. It is a central theological claim of Genesis to Kings that the fall of Jerusalem and other disasters were God's judgement for sins against the covenant. The writer certainly identifies the reason for the flood as sin, rather than any other cause such as the gods reducing human noise and numbers. The aim is not to polemically advocate unlimited fertility, but to oppose amoral explanations of disaster and insist on a theodicy of justice.

Also in other ways the contrast is not absolute. *Atrahasis* offers an aetiology of mortality, and there are traces of parallel ideas in the Old Testament (Hendel 24). Genesis includes a decree of mortality (3:19,22), and a limiting of lifespan to 120 years (6:3). Genesis includes a malediction on childbearing (3:16) which can encompass not only labour pains but also maternal sorrow at premature deaths such as of Abel, and infant mortality (e.g. 2 Samuel 12:18), and the risk of maternal death (Genesis 35:17-18). The divine right of closing wombs and killing infants, especially the first-born, also features in the Old Testament. The OT distinctive is that implementation of these constraints on human life is vested solely in YHWH, whereas in *Atrahasis* they are implemented by sub-divine agents.

In any case, it is unwise to characterize ancient or Mesopotamian thought the one text *Atrahasis*. Desire for fecundity is evident across the ancient Near East in artefacts and texts. These do not often specify human fertility but that is partly due to genre. In mythologies full of gods and demigods, ideas about humanity are expressed through stories about divine beings. For example, the fecundity of Enlil and Enki is exalted, Asherah has seventy sons, and the Akkadian mother goddess bears seven sons and seven daughters (Yegerlehner 54). Figurines of a pregnant woman represent goddesses, but they also express human goals. The *Instruction of Anii*, from Egypt, urges hearers "Take a wife while you're young, That she make a son for you ...

Happy the man whose people are many, He is saluted on account of his progeny” (Halo 1: 111). Many rituals identify barrenness in women as a curse, and children as blessings. One Hittite prayer pleads with absent gods “come ye to ... Hatti land. Bring with with you life, good health, long years, power of procreation, sons, daughters, grandchildren, great-grandchildren” (ANET 352). Sons were wanted more than daughters. In the Ugaritic *Legend of Kirta*, the god El blesses “the woman you take into your house ... shall bear you seven sons” (Halo 1:337). Ancient cultures usually valued human fecundity.

### **Psalm 127:3-5 as a Song of Ascent**

Sons are a heritage from YHWH, the fruit of the womb his reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he contends with his enemies at the gate.

Many scholars identify the genre of this psalm (at least in its origins) as proverbial wisdom for ordinary people. It concerned “everyday life” (Kraus 453), and “the farmhouse” (Hunter 237). It was “domestic” (Gerstenberger 346), and speaks to “universal preoccupations” of work, security, and family (Kidner 440). Its emphasis that “the larger the family, the less vulnerable” reflects ancient culture (Mays 401). However, using an imagined domestic origin as interpretive key has problems. The specification (v.5) of how sons help does not match the everyday ways a farmer’s sons helped him (as detailed above). Instead, they contend with enemies at the gate. Some suggest it refers to a “law court” (Allen 181), where “perhaps having many sons present would sway judicial decisions in one’s favor” (Clifford 240). Perhaps, but that would contradict the OT ideal of justice for widows (Deuteronomy 10:18) who lack male advocates (Goulder 67). Alternatively if social conflict is imagined it would present a norm of settling disputes by intimidation by whoever can call more muscle (of youths), which sits uneasily with an ideal that wisdom (of elders) is the essential at the gate (Proverbs 24:7). The simile of arrows connotes ambush and wounding (Psalm 64:7),<sup>119</sup> which (given a domestic reading) is private feuding. It makes more sense to understand the imagery to depict “national military rather than

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119. Arrows shot by God can be punishments (Lamentations 3:13), not just war but also sickness (Psalm 38:2), plague, and famine (Ezekiel 5:16), but these arrows are a man’s.

individual legal conflict,” so *‘ōyebîm* refers not to private enemies but “armies of enemy peoples” (Fleming 436, 442). Against claims that *dbr* supports a nonviolent setting, it can be translated “destroy” (2 Chronicles 22:10), or “subdue” (Psalm 47:3; 18:47). Here a translation “repulse” or “drive back” from the gate is suggested by ancient Near Eastern usage (Dahood 225, Crow 67).

The relation of the psalm’s two strophes is important in exegesis. I think the first gives the key message, which is the futility of human plans and effort without God (Davidson 418), while the second is an illustration (Clifford 241), and the *banah bānîm* wordplay simply links them. By contrast some make a family theme rule the psalm. Allen suggests “house” (v.1) “refers metaphorically to raising a family” (178). However, reading the psalm in its canonical OT setting raises it to national and messianic meanings. Psalm 127 is one of a set of fifteen (120 to 134) which have the superscription *shir* (song) *hama’aloth*<sup>120</sup> (steps, stairs, or ascents), and are linked to the Jerusalem temple. Elie Assis links Psalm 127 to failed attempts to rebuild the temple (Ezra 4:1-5), and a theological explanation that God’s timing for a new temple was future not present (263, 266), so “it will not be possible to construct it” and the people should instead focus on domestic life until “a more auspicious time” (268, 271). Assis suggests Haggai 1:9 rebukes these ideas. Alternatively, with more speculative precision, Michael Goulder links the Ascent psalms to Nehemiah. He links psalms 127 and 128 with Nehemiah 7:5 and 11:1 where he finds “traces of a policy to repopulate the city” with settlers (30), for the “strength of Jerusalem” will be a larger population and “their number depends in the long run on children, not imported adults” (67). These two scholars’ different proposals both link the fecundity message with particular historical anxieties, making it specific to Israel’s past and perhaps less amenable to natalist appropriation.

Some key words in the Ascent psalms are associated with kingship: “David, anointed, throne” (Hunter 229). Insofar as the “house” at 127:1 is familial,<sup>121</sup> it may be dynastic: echoing the story of 2 Samuel 7, in which David wishes to build a house

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120. Psalm 121 has a slightly different form: *lama’aloth* (v.1).

121. It is however more likely to signify the temple, as the parallels of house/city elsewhere (Jeremiah 26; 1 Kings 8:44; 23:27) refer to Jerusalem and the temple (Fleming 436).

(a temple) for YHWH but instead God promises to build a house (a royal dynasty) for David (Clifford 239, Mitchell 123). A psalm of Ascent (132:11) recalls that YHWH swore to David: “One of your fruit of the womb I will set on your throne” (ESV). A further contextual feature is that Psalm 127 is one of only two in the Psalter linked by superscription to Solomon. Regardless of provenance, this can legitimately shape a canonical interpretation. The “man” like a *gibbōr* (mighty hero) whose heirs (arrows) are destined to subdue enemies (127:4-5) may be a national leader. A ruler must ensure the “continuity of his dynasty through numerous sons” (Dahood 224), and the people want sons born in his youth (v.4), so he may not die while his heir is still a child, a time of weakness inviting opportunistic enemies. If the Ascent psalms’ redaction is post-exilic the royal motif shows an “interest in ideal kingship” (Hunter 236), and perhaps “hope in a future messianic restoration” (Wilson 235). The images of harvest and fertility in the Ascent psalms may look to an eschatological *Sukkoth* (Mitchell 114), and if so the quiver of sons is the fecund hyperbole that typically accompanies eschatological *shalom*, like the tree that bears “fruit every month” (Ezekiel 47:12). The varying scholarly interpretations of this psalm depend on which features of context are emphasized. In my view any of the theological interpretations described above is preferable to the domestic interpretation.

## **Natalism compared with OT ideas**

In chapter 2 natalist arguments were categorized under headings covering the benefits of numerous offspring for parents, the nation, and church growth; and a duty implied in God’s commands, the cultural mandate, and the natural order. I considered different emphases concerning whether high fertility is particularly for godly people, or for all. Each of these ideas will be evaluated in comparison to the original and OT canonical contexts of the Old Testament fruitful verses.

### **Universal or sectarian?**

Chapter 2 observed that while some natalists call people of all religions to high fecundity, most prioritize the increase of godly Christians.<sup>122</sup> Almost all the verses

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122. Some natalists occasionally extend their exhortation beyond the church, calling on their fellow Americans to have bigger families.

they cite are in the original context addressed exclusively to Israel. Christian natalists apply these texts (such as Psalm 127) to the church. There is an established rationale for doing this in Christian tradition which applies Israel's promises to the church by extension or supersessionist transfer. However the same tradition also transforms the meaning of the fruitful verses in other ways, which will be explored in chapter 5. Natalists have pulled apart Christian tradition's approach to these verses, picking up its transference of addressee, but neglecting the transformation of meaning. As for universal natalists who apply the Israel-oriented promises to all (unredeemed) people without distinction, that has no warrant in Christian tradition.

The only fruitful verses exempt from the need for a referent-changing hermeneutic are those which were, perhaps, originally intended to have universal scope. Only 2 out of 180 texts cited by natalists are candidates for this universal category: Genesis 1:28 and 9:1,7. After the undoing of creation in the flood, Noah and his sons need and receive a fresh blessing. The call of Abraham is another fresh start because Babel has universal reference as indicated by the phrases "whole earth" (11:1), and "sons of Adam" (5). Humankind, sinning again at Babel, is not physically destroyed this time because of God's post-flood rainbow vow to never again undo creation, but God's choice of Abram implies that the remainder of humankind is judged unfit and displaced from being the vehicle of God's purposes. This renders untenable any idea that the fecundity of *goyim*, the other nations, is eschatologically significant or a sign of obedience to God's mandate.

### **Blessing in the Old Testament**

Many sons is a greater blessing than a few, and there seems to be no upper limit. After listing the seven sons of Meshelemiah, the eight sons of Obed-edom are listed with the remark "for God blessed him" (1 Chronicles 26:5). A list of temple servants observes: "All these were sons of Heman the king's seer. They were given to him through the promises of God to exalt him. God gave to Heman fourteen sons and three daughters" (1 Chronicles 25:5). This number comes close to the biological maximum for one wife, and the ratio of sons and daughters (14:3) may suggest a typical Israelite father's ideal hope.

Genesis 1:28 is framed as a blessing. In the ancient Near East that meant in one word "prosperity" (Grüneberg 102) or "success" (Wenham, *Genesis* 24), which is a



gift from God. It can refer to particular good things, or a general state. The word blessing is used specifically with reference to land (Deuteronomy 23:33), springs of water (Joshua 15:19), rain (Ezekiel 34:26), food (Malachi 3:10), wine (Isaiah 65:8), and life (Psalms 133:3).<sup>123</sup> It is a long-term condition and through the course of a life typically one may picture a child maturing and then acquiring land and livestock, which through his labour prosper and are fertile. Each year the land yields a harvest and the stock produce calves, kids, and lambs.<sup>124</sup> The man has a house, marries a wife, and has many offspring (more sons than daughters) who are helpers for him. He accumulates wealth, and is secure from thieves, raiders and enemies. He is kept in good health, and when in fullness of old age he dies and rests with his ancestors, his heirs ensure his name and memory endure.

Such blessing was desired by ancient Near Eastern men because these were objective and obvious benefits. In the modern world the generic idea of prosperity is easily recognizable: health, wealth, and long life. The most significant difference now is that numerous offspring do not materially benefit a man in so many ways as they once did. When modern natalists chastise those who do not want additional offspring they neglect this characteristic of blessing: if potential recipients are unsure whether they want the blessing it is probably not a real blessing; and if they do not want it then it certainly is not a blessing in OT terms.

### **Economic cornucopia?**

Calvin Beisner finds in the story of “Abram and Lot ... the earliest instance recorded in the Bible of the impression that a local human population had outstripped the ability of the land to support it” (“Imago” 173). In an interview by *Christianity Today*, Beisner argues that Lot “feared the land would not support both of their families, whereas Abraham trusted God to provide,” and he warns those worried about population that they “reflect Lot more than Abraham. They don’t trust in God’s ability to provide.” Beisner judged the “impression” of overcrowding to be

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123. Blessing in the Old Testament can also refer to a speech or act that conveys it, a gift, or thanks to God.

124. These moments of blessing are intimately linked to OT religion in the timing of the main religious festivals in autumn and spring.

wrong, but the biblical narrator reports “the land could not support both of them dwelling together” (Genesis 13:6). Both men had “flocks and herds” and there was “strife between the herdsmen” (13:2, 5) probably over water and grazing. Given the feasible radius of grazing from a camp, they had to separate. *Contra* Beisner, it was Abraham (not Lot) who took the initiative in suggesting their separation, and there is no suggestion that the problem did not exist.<sup>125</sup>

Competition with others is another issue appearing in this story because we read that Canaanites and Perizzites also dwelt in that place (Genesis 13:7). The OT writers are aware of the potential for conflict. Isaac had controversies with Philistines and herdsmen of Gerar over wells, and moved several times. When at last he found an uncontested water supply at Rehoboth he exclaims “now the LORD hath made room (*rchb*) for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Genesis 26:22). This text recognizes that groups compete for land and water (for land is useless without water) and one must find space in order to become great (*rbh*). The “room” made for Isaac’s group is *rchb*, meaning breadth, which with reference to land is a similar concept to *Lebensraum*. When the number of people or the size of their herds increase (both are encompassed by *rbh*) conflict arises. Abraham’s god invites him to walk through the *rchb* of the land (Genesis 13:17) in anticipation of the future dispossession of the Canaanites to accommodate new seed as numerous as dust. Ironically, the trusting Shechemites said there was enough *rchb* to accommodate Jacob’s clan (Genesis 34:21). Later, the tribe of Dan rejoice not only that the “land is broad” but also that its present inhabitants at Laish were *bth*, unsuspecting (Judges 18:7,10). Israel needs land that is empty, or whose inhabitants can be subdued (enslaved) or removed. They are exhorted to “cast out nations, and enlarge your borders” (Exodus 23:24). The cornucopian vision of conflict-free population growth is alien to the Old Testament, for it is “when YHWH enlarges your borders as he has promised you may eat meat whenever you desire” (Deuteronomy 1:20). Similarly the motive for Ammonite war crimes was a desire to enlarge their territory in Gilead (Amos 1:13). The OT realists

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125. An ecological reading might imagine Abraham hearing quarrels at the well, noticing the signs of overgrazing, and acting decisively to solve the environmental problem. But the OT writer’s main interest is the departure of Lot as heir apparent, for the chosen people is not to be Moab or Ammon (Genesis 19:37), but the descendants of Isaac.

knew that in the ancient Near East for one people to increase in numbers required that other peoples be displaced or decreased.

### **Commanded to multiply?**

The most common criticism levelled against natalist (and procreationist) exegesis is that “be fruitful” is not a command but a blessing. Beisner offers two counter arguments: that “the verbs are in the imperative,” and that blessing and command are not mutually exclusive for “God blessed mankind by giving us the command to be fruitful and multiply, and we in turn are blessed when we obey the command” (*Garden* 207). I will evaluate the claim about imperatives, and then the idea that Genesis 1:28 is both command and blessing.

Possible functions of the imperatives in Genesis 1:28 include command, blessing, description of nature, and a theological attack on aNE fertility cults. Though many *Qal* imperatives in Genesis are commands or requests (23:4,8; 34:8), others are invitations (24:18,31,44,46), offers (23:15; 24:51), promises (12:2), blessings (24:60; 33:11), negotiations (23:13), suggestions (34:10), reflections (19:34; 27:27), consolations (18:5) or exclamations (39:14; 41:41). Some invite the hearer to an unprejudiced choice, as in “dwell wherever you like” (20:15), or “bury your dead in whichever tomb you like” (23:6,11). The betrothal blessing spoken to Rebekah by her family (Genesis 24:60) is imperative in form but is not a command (Van Leeuwen 60). It is clear that grammatical imperatives are not necessarily commands; that must be decided by context.

There is debate as to whether it makes sense to refer to “be fruitful” as a command. Since a similar imperative to “be fruitful and increase and fill the waters” (Genesis 1:22) is addressed to all sea creatures, some argue that since nonhuman creatures do not hear God or respond (or at least that some kinds are too primitive to be able to do that), it cannot be an ethical command and must be something else: a description of the created order. For example, John Calvin commented on 1:22 that God “infuses into them fecundity” (Calvin 24).

Another argument against “be fruitful” being a command is that fertility was not (in the ancient world) an area over which human beings had control. For example, when Rachel asks Jacob to “give me children” he rebukes her and asks “Am I in God’s stead?” (Genesis 30:2). God alone can “open” the womb (Genesis

29:31; 30:22) so it is not a command that can be obeyed but rather a blessing to receive. However the procreationist idea that it is a command to be always open to conception is not ruled out by this consideration.

The idea that Genesis 1:28 was a command (as well as blessing) should not be lightly dismissed as there is no scholarly consensus. Norbert Lohfink discerns that “fruitfulness ... is a blessing and not a commandment” (7). Raymond van Leeuwen similarly judges that 1:28 “is not a commandment but a blessing” (59), and Gene Tucker agrees (6). John Sailhamer confirms that “the imperatives are not to be understood as commands” (96). On the other hand, some dissent: Laurence Turner asserts that 1:28 is “both blessing and command” (22), and so does David Clines (“Eve” 53). Others, while not discussing it, refer in passing to 1:28 as a command. For example Gordon Wenham claims that reproduction is “the first command given to humankind” (“Family” 25). Though the majority of substantial treatments are against 1:28 being originally a command, the question is unsettled.

### **Created nature**

Those forbidding contraception (whether from natalist or other motives) claim that Onan is punished by death for departing from nature in spilling his seed (Genesis 38). The modern explanation that Onan’s offence is not donating a posthumous heir for his brother Er, is contradicted by natalists who point to the penalty for refusing the Levirate obligation being shame not death (Deuteronomy 25:5). However, the offence that would incur the penalty of ritual humiliation for Onan (assuming a culture similar to that in Deuteronomy) is a public refusal of Levirate duty. Onan instead agrees to his father’s request. Now his legal (and moral) position is different since by marrying Tamar he has agreed to generate Er’s heir. Onan secretly avoids consummation “so as not to give seed to his brother”. Deceiving one’s father is a more serious offence, meriting death (Deuteronomy 21:21). Further, if Onan had simply refused then Judah could turn to ask Shelah, but his deceit prevents that possibility, and so cuts off his brother’s posterity. Also there is a greater issue in the background: the narrator tells us the Davidic royal line will come from this widow, so Onan is standing in the way of a central divine purpose, a unique feature of the story that is not transferable to modern readers.

Natalists advocate early marriage, for women and men also, claiming it is normal, natural and biblical. By contrast, historically average age at marriage has varied between cultures, and by gender. In the ancient Near East most females were married soon after puberty (Meyers 28), but whereas girls usually married in their teens, “men waited until well into their twenties or even early thirties before marrying” (King and Stager 37). Given an average life expectancy of forty, this was quite late. Neither does early marriage for men find support in OT narratives. The stories of Genesis do not portray men rushing to marry, for example (in the absence of information on marriage age) the age at which a man’s first son was born in the prediluvian genealogy (in a context of multi-century lifespans) ranges from 65 to 187. After the flood among the shorter-lived descendants of Shem (11:10-26) a man’s age at his first son ranges from 29 for Nahor, to 70 for Terah. Later there are some mentions of age at marriage: 40 years for Isaac (25:20), and Esau (26:34), and Jacob was over 50 when he married (29:20 and see 27:1).

### **Application of fruitful verses**

Modern biblical scholarship wisely makes a sharp distinction between original meaning, which is anchored in the ancient Near East, and contemporary application. The dangers of applying the Old Testament directly to the modern world are often obvious.<sup>126</sup> The problem of temporal and cultural distance is compounded by the dispensational gap between the Old and New Covenants. The informing of Christian ethics by the Old Testament is a complex and difficult process.

Some commentators on fruitful verses note a distance between ancient and modern worlds, and warn that OT pro-fertility ideas are not necessarily appropriate for contemporary application. Robert Davidson finds in Psalm 127 “cultural and social assumptions that are far removed from those of the Western world ... Large families are out of fashion today. Indeed, to many they are regarded as irresponsible in a world of population growth and finite resources” (420). Leslie Allen is more forthright: “The modern reader of Psalm 127 finds himself detached from its cultural setting ... Living as he does in days of overpopulation” (181). Turning to Psalm 128

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126. For example in 1560s Geneva the judicial punishment, including one execution, of children for insulting parents was an attempt to follow biblical law (Kingdon 361).

he warns that it is inapplicable: “Fertility ... is the dream of any primitive society [but]... The simple philosophy of the psalm receives qualification even in the Old Testament and certainly in the New Testament” (185).

Other scholarly commentators, however, incautiously present original meaning as helpful wisdom for contemporary readers, or even as God’s word for today. The same scholars might on other issues (for example slavery or the status of women) be more cautious, but they seem to not regard fertility as ethically problematic. This illustrates the need for chapters 5 and 6 of my thesis: when one tries to move directly from OT original meaning to application, without the filtering treatment available through Christian tradition and reason, the results can unwittingly be dangerous. Two examples are given below.

Daniel Estes focuses on the arrow imagery in Psalm 127, which he thinks refers to all kinds of conflict: legal, social, and armed. Estes notes that others have construed the sons as “defensive protection” but points out that arrows, being missile weapons, are more apt for “offensive action” as in Psalms 11:2 and 64:3 (306-07). Estes also extends the idea of “long-range effect” to the temporal dimension. “As arrows shot from the bow are propelled toward a remote target according to the desire of the archer, so children when properly nurtured extend the effect of their father into human society of the next generation.” This is a “future hope” and “social immortality” for “they can perpetuate his activity as they reflect his values” (310). Estes identifies this as the Psalm’s theme. When he offers “application of the psalm” he transforms and reduces it to this: “the individual can make a positive contribution to society by the careful, godly nurture of children” (311). Estes here elides most of the distinctive features he has identified: the emphasis on male offspring, on conflict, offensive action, and the quantity. The reader is left wondering if those aspects are included in his evaluation that it offers a “positive message” (311), or only his final summative application. Estes’ silence leaves the applicability of those features in doubt. They have consequences: if every man needs a son then over twice as many offspring are needed than if any gender is satisfactory.<sup>127</sup> Further, having just one son

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127. Because one or more daughters may appear before any son. Demographers identify “son preference” as a major cause of high birth rates, even today, for example in Pakistan where men often desire at least two sons (Hussain 384).

is precarious for immortal social effect so any man following the original intent (as presented by Estes) will desire many sons.

David Petersen responds to Christians who think their modern family values derive from Scripture, and he encourages his peers that “biblical scholars have a role to play in the current debates, since who better than one of us is in a position to talk about family values as they are depicted” in Scripture (5).<sup>128</sup> His goal is to identify original meaning. Petersen finds three “family values” in Genesis: the first is “an expansive view of the family,” the second is “the need for an heir, someone to whom the family’s property may be passed” and so the promise might not fail, and the third is “conflict resolution without physical violence” (10, 17, 22). He applies the third to spousal abuse, urging readers to “deploy this biblical family value.” Readers might expect the second value, the need for a male heir, to also have some application, but Petersen skips past it without comment.<sup>129</sup> The result illustrates the incompleteness of a contemporary ethics derived from the Old Testament (and humane reason) alone. Christian tradition might identify his first value, the species united as one family, as problematic since those reborn in Christ could be regarded as a separate family. It certainly challenges his second value, concerning the purpose of Abraham’s lineage. Petersen admits the difficulty of applying “Genesis family values” directly, and characterizes them as “a resource for thinking about family values.” (15). However he elsewhere claims that “these values are ... important today” and are “of immediate relevance” (22).

### **Conclusion**

The cultural, political and theological context of the OT fruitful verses limits their plausible appropriation by modern natalism. Pro-fertility ideas in the ancient Near East are unsurprising given the demands of political survival against empires,

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128. Coincidentally his first paragraph observes that some “organizations spend vast sums of money to promulgate their views on issues such as pro-natalism and gay marriage.” He does not revisit contemporary pro-natalism.

129. Petersen uses the first value to argue that the second and third can be applied at a social scale as well as in a household. He very briefly presents a globalized version of the second value, the virtue of avoiding human extinction by, swiftly returning to his third value, non-violent international relations.

immortality through patriarchal lineage, and agrarian life in the Judean highlands. None are relevant motives for modern Christians in the USA.

Even for Israel in the Old Testament, fecundity is just one aspect of a divine agenda for creating a holy nation in the promised land. It is most important in the earliest stages but when it is substantially fulfilled other aspects of the agenda, land and holiness, become more pressing. Though an idea of Israel as solely the biological descendants of Jacob remains strong it is challenged occasionally in OT theology by visions of a holy people constituted by covenant and spiritual renewal.

Natalist ideas were compared with OT ideas and found to differ in significant ways. An OT blessing contributes materially to one's prosperity, and was regarded as a reward for loyalty to God: when modern natalists rebuke those supposedly refusing additional blessings they lose sight of this original meaning. Distinctive features of the original are ignored by natalists as inconvenient, for example the disapproval of singleness, and the gender preference for sons. The fruitful verses then applied to Israel not to humankind in general, making universal natalism untenable.

OT specialists treating the fruitful verses present insights into "what it meant" for the ancient Israelites. Most, wisely, do not venture to say "what it means" for Christians today. Those who do attempt direct application either discard most of the distinctive features of the texts, or produce lessons which conflict with traditional Christian interpretation. The search for original meaning should be only a first step for those wanting to use the Old Testament as a guide to modern life, and the next chapter looks at a Christian reception of the fruitful verses.



## Chapter 5. Augustine on fruitfulness

In the early centuries of Christianity the significance of biological reproduction was intensely debated. The writings of Augustine (354-430) dominated subsequent western Christian reflection on the topic until Martin Luther. In part that simply reflected Augustine's general predominance in Christian thought,<sup>130</sup> but it was also due to the valuing of his innovative resolution of tensions concerning the origin, past, present, and future of human reproduction. Jeremy Cohen claims Augustine made the "single most extensive and influential contribution to the Christian career of Gen. 1:28," and that medieval writers (he surveyed up to 1500) added little that was new in the reception of that verse (Cohen 21).

This chapter has three parts. The first sets Augustine's thought on reproduction in historical context. It looks briefly at ideas in ancient philosophy and Christianity. It considers why Augustine wrote about reproduction, and how the controversies in which he engaged shaped his developing thought. The second part examines his biblical exegesis and the place of reproduction in his view of salvation history. It considers the hermeneutics Augustine applied to Genesis 1:28 and other Scriptures. The third part practises *ressourcement*, asking what Augustine's ideas can contribute to a Christian evaluation of natalist interpretation.

### Chronology and writings

Augustine was born in Numidia (modern Algeria), part of the prosperous Roman province whose capital was Carthage. He worked as a teacher of rhetoric there and in Rome and Milan. He was brought up a Catholic by his mother Monica, but became a Manichean hearer<sup>131</sup> for nine years, and then a Neoplatonist. Attracted by Ambrose's preaching in Milan, and the inspiring example of Christian ascetics, he was baptized in 387, ordained in 391, and in 395 was made a bishop. He was bishop of Hippo for 35 years until his death in 430 (Brown, *Augustine* 19, 432).

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130. For example, the standard medieval Catholic compilation of Bible commentary, *Glossa ordinaria*, is dominated by quotations from his works (AE 383).

131. Hearers were second-rate Manicheans who settled for a less than perfect life.

Augustine commented on the Genesis creation narrative in five works: *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos* (*Gn. adv. Man.*) in 388, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (*Gn. litt. imp.*) around 393, books 11-13 of *Confessiones* (*conf.*) about 400, *De Genesi ad Litteram* (*Gn. litt.*) between 401 and 415, and parts of *De Civitate Dei* (*civ. Dei*) written between 413 and 427. However there is much about reproduction elsewhere, in his writings against Manicheism,<sup>132</sup> on the controversy about Jovinian and Jerome,<sup>133</sup> and against Pelagianism.<sup>134</sup> Helpful insights also appear in *Sermones* (*serm.*), especially his Christmas sermons reflecting on the Virgin Mary, and in *enarrationes in Psalmos* (*en. Ps.*), especially those on Psalms 127 and 128. The surviving 544 sermons,<sup>135</sup> and 299 letters in *Epistulae* (*ep.*) constitute almost half (45%) of Augustine's writings but are relatively neglected (Kretzmann and Stump 23, 11). In some areas of thought Augustine did change during his Christian career but the aspects important for my discussion remained constant, including his spiritual interpretations of the fruitful verses.

The intended audience of his writings is ordained people and elite laity. The sermons however were preached in church, mostly at Hippo, and sometimes in Carthage. One contextual feature alluded to later is that Augustine often signals in sermons that he is turning to address different parts of the congregation. Standing near the front were virgins, and behind them the consecrated widows, with the married people further back. Also, before and after Easter, he might address the *catechumens*, or *competentes* (those asking to be baptized), or *infantes* (those recently baptized) who were mostly adult converts.

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132. Two books against Manichean individuals, *Contra Adimantum* (*c. Adim.*), and *Contra Secundinum* (*c. Sec.*), were published for the first time in English translation in 2006 (WSA I/19:12). My citations from *The Works of Saint Augustine* all use the standard format WSA series/volume:page.

133. Especially in *De bono conjugalit* (*b. conjug.*) written in 401.

134. These controversies are described in part 1, and the works used are itemized there.

135. New sermons have been discovered since 1989, and twenty-six of them were translated in WSA III/1:16.

## Historical context of Augustine's thought

### Philosophical ideas about reproduction

Chapter 2 mentioned state natalism as normal in the ancient world: rulers wanted high reproduction among their subjects for strategic reasons. Philosophers similarly portrayed reproduction as a civic duty. Plato in *Republic* and *Laws* offers two versions of an approach requiring strict eugenic regulations to maintain the quality of offspring, and also to ensure there were neither too few nor too many to replenish a population of 5,040 men, his ideal number for a city (Gaca 49). Stoic philosophers taught a citizen's duty to produce legitimate offspring. The ideal constitution designed by Cicero banned singleness: *On the Laws* 3.3.7 states "*caelibes esse prohibunto*" (Daube 27).

Procreationism, the idea that sexual acts should always aim at reproduction (and be within marriage) was discussed in chapter 1 which noted its origins in Pythagorean eugenics, its religious transformation in Philo, and its adoption into Christianity by Clement of Alexandria (Gaca 94, 255, 271). Augustine inherited this "Alexandrian rule" as traditional (Brakke 186), but his version was milder than Clement's. It became the main source of subsequent Catholic teaching. For example, Augustine wrote that "to demand the debt from your marriage partner more than is required for the procreation of children is indeed a sin, though a venial one." He commented on the Old Testament patriarchs: "So chaste were they in their relations with their wives ... that they never went in to them for carnal intercourse except for the sake of procreation" (*Sermones (serm.)* 51.22 tr. WSA III/3:34, 33). This is a minor feature in Augustine's thought and though it does shape his views on reproduction I will argue that his non-natalist attitude is rooted less in his antipathy to sexuality than in deeper themes of salvation history and eschatology, the supreme good, and the consequent relative value of different vocations.

### Christian, Encratite and dualist attitudes to reproduction

Reproduction featured in Augustine's writings because of tensions within Scripture that generated diversity in Christianity. Perpetuating a patriarchal genetic line was important in the Old Testament, but in the New Covenant spiritual kinship, freedom from secular ties, and personal resurrection were prioritized. The contrast

was heightened by an early Christian orientation toward a heavenly rather than an earthly vocation. Celibacy and even asceticism were part of Christianity from the 1st century, but the form we call monasticism emerged in the 3rd century. Augustine's encounter in Rome with a house of monks and the *Life of Antony* played a part in his conversion (*conf.* 8), as did Ambrose, mediator of the ideas of Origen, Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. Augustine told his congregation in Hippo that "I ... came to this city as a young man ... looking for a place to establish a monastery, and live there with my brothers" (*serm.* 355.2 tr. WSA III/10:165). Augustine founded in Hippo a special type of monastery, attached to his main church, for priests as well as lay brothers (H. Chadwick 63). In the west the only earlier "cathedral" monastery was founded *circa* 363 by the bishop of Vercelli (Harrison 184). Augustine was a pioneer of monasticism in the province of Carthage.

Those Christians now deemed orthodox mostly wrote about reproduction only when reacting against other groups which identified themselves as Christian while forbidding marriage in some circumstances. These can be placed in two categories which I label dualism and Encratism. In the first, for Marcionites and many Gnostics their denigration of marriage was one aspect of a dualist denigration of the physical world (Cohen 243). Only single or divorced people could be baptized in Marcionite churches (Lieu 40). In the second category, Encratism, the motive differed. From common Christian beliefs about a hierarchy of spirit and flesh, an idea that sexuality was not original, and an eschatological reading of Paul for marriage's obsolescence they concluded that celibacy was a command. Some churches in Syria, where Tatian was a leader, and some in Egypt led by Hieracas, required catechumens to vow celibacy (Hunter, *Marriage* 132). Augustine in *De haeresibus* reported that "they are also called Encratites ... they do not admit into their number anyone, whether man or woman, who is living a married life" (*haer.* 25 tr. WSA I/18:38. ).<sup>136</sup> Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Epiphanius of Salamis, Origen, John Chrysostom and other orthodox Fathers wrote against these ideas, labouring to affirm reproduction though most were themselves celibate.

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136. *Encrateia* is the Greek word for abstinence or continence.

Historians call others “moderate Encratites” who claimed that the “original things have passed away” (2 Corinthians 5:18), or even that “male and female” are abolished (Galatians 3:28), but did not step over the line into heresy by forbidding marriage (D’Angelo 1). “Encratism predominated for a time in the Churches of eastern Syria and Mesopotamia, without those Churches being considered heretical” (Price 122). Aphrahat, a leading Syriac Christian, regarded celibacy as the only path to holiness (Koltun-Fromm 386). In the west, the anonymous treatise *De castitate* (circa 400) argued that since Genesis 2:24 prefigured the relation of Christ and the church symbolically (Ephesians 5:31), marriage no longer had any function and should be expected to pass away (Clark 358). Even so these moderate Encratites stayed within the orthodox consensus that celibacy was a voluntary evangelical counsel rather than a command.

Three controversies were immediate causes prompting Augustine to develop his theology of reproduction. His efforts to shake off his opponents’ accusations that he was still Manichean are a thread running through the controversies. The first was his attack on Manicheism. The second was his effort to respond to the issues raised by Jovinian and Jerome. The third was his long running debate with Julian of Eclanum. I will consider each of these.

### **Manicheism, real and imagined**

In Persia in the 3rd century AD, Mani taught a dualist cosmogony in which divine light (he revered the sun) was trapped in earthly bodies. He called it a “religion of Light” but outsiders called it Manicheism. He deprecated reproduction because it imprisoned fragments of divinity, or souls, in flesh (AE 239) citing *mor.* 2.18). Of the two classes of Manichean, the elect were celibate, and married hearers were encouraged to practise contraception.<sup>137</sup> Augustine wrote about fifteen anti-Manichean works by 411. While a hearer he had persuaded many Catholic friends and pupils to join the Manicheans, and now he urgently desired to call them back. His anti-Manichean writings include *Contra Adimantum Manichei disciplum* in

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137. WSA I/19:11. In 373, a year after Augustine took a common-law wife (concubine) their son Adeodatus was born. About that time he joined the Manichees, and Kim Power speculates that the non-appearance of subsequent children during the 17 years of Augustine’s faithful concubinage indicates their use of contraception (AE 222; cf. *b. conjug.* 5).

393/4, and *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* in 397/9. David Hunter observes that these polemical writings are more pro-marriage (and I would add that they are also more pro-reproduction) than his other works written during the same period such as the *Confessiones* (“Introduction” WSA I/9:9-11).

Manicheans in their apologetics quoted the Scriptures used by Christians.<sup>138</sup> They liked the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters, but regarded OT writings as carnal. Adda (called Adimantus in the West) claimed that the Old Testament was incompatible with the New Testament, and he juxtaposed verses from them to show contradictions. These criticisms of the morality of the patriarchs in Genesis prompted Augustine to justify their reproductive obsessions.<sup>139</sup> To the Manichean complaint that the Old Testament focused on temporal rewards, contrasting Deuteronomy 28 and Matthew 16:24, Augustine responded that “carnal and temporal rewards were suitably promised to a people that was still carnal” (*c. Adim.* 18.1 tr. WSA I/19:212). Augustine argued that “when God commands polygamy it is virtue” (*conf.* 3.7.12) and that the patriarchs “only have wives for the sake of getting children” (*serm.* 51.23 tr. WSA III/3:34). He deployed allegory in defence of the obligation to marry a brother’s widow (Leviticus 25), which text “urges preachers to raise up seed for their dead brother Christ” by preaching the gospel of rebirth (*c. Faust.* 32.10 cited in Clark, *Renunciation* 89). He also points out, referring to Isaiah 56:4 that “even in the Old Testament ... they have the great promises made to eunuchs, lest the Manicheans think that they were praised by the Lord only in the New Testament” (*c. Adim.* 3, tr. WSA I/19:180).

Christian advocates of celibacy were vulnerable to accusations of Manicheism. In the late 3rd century Mani’s religion spread to the Roman empire, but its foreign origin and “immoral” teachings provoked emperor Diocletian in 302 to order the burning of Manicheans and their Scriptures (Lieu 6). This decree lapsed, but emperor Theodosius in 381 and 389 issued new legislation tasking “specific members of the

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138. For example, there are no citations of Manichean scriptures in the surviving text of Faustus’ *Apologia* (Lieu 120), but many references to the Bible.

139. Manicheans accepted the New Testament (apart from the genealogies of Christ) as Scripture (WSA I/9:12).

secret service” with prosecuting the Manichean elect (Lieu 111). Priscillian of Avila and two other Spanish bishops were accused of Manicheism by their local peers and travelled to appeal to various Italian bishops, but amidst a political crisis a new emperor beheaded Priscillian and six associates in 385 (Hunter, “Resistance” 50). Priscillian’s writings indicate that he was not a Manichean but only a moderate Encratite (Lieu 114). Ambrose of Milan was “plagued” in his later years (he died in 397) by accusations of Manicheism (Clark 100).

Augustine, as a former Manichee, was unusually vulnerable. He was promoted in 395 by Valerius of Hippo but not trusted by Megalius, primate of Numidia (M.T. Clark 11). It was common knowledge that Manichean hearers were adept in religious camouflage. Cyril of Jerusalem had warned in 350 in his book about heretics of the danger of accepting repentant Manichees into the church too easily. Augustine, in a letter written after he became a bishop, reported to Deuterius that he had exposed and punished Victorinus, a subdeacon, as a secret Manichee:

After he confessed that he was a hearer in the Manichees, he in fact asked me to bring him back to the path of truth, which is Catholic doctrine. But I admit, I was aghast at his pretense in the guise of a cleric, and I took measures to expel him from the city after chastising him. (*ep.* 236 tr. WSA II/4:135)

Coyle judged that Augustine “lived his entire Catholic life in dread of being branded a crypto-Manichean” (18; also see H. Chadwick 65). His reputation, influence and legacy were at stake.<sup>140</sup> In such circumstances it is remarkable that Augustine dared to preach or write anything less than entirely positive about reproduction. That he sometimes did suggests he was confident that he could show his ideas were firmly anchored in the New Testament and mainstream Christian tradition.

### **The controversy over Jovinian’s teachings**

The teachings of Jovinian (d. 405) have been reconstructed from Jerome’s reply, and Ambrose’s letter to Siricius. Jovinian argued that virgins and widows would not receive greater reward than the married, as “baptism with full faith” confers equal merit and in heaven all will receive the same reward (Hunter, “Resistance” 45). Jovinian had been provoked by liturgical innovations elevating

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140. *Retractationes* indicates Augustine was concerned to safeguard his legacy.

celibacy, for example the use of the text “I espoused you to one husband” (2 Corinthians 11:2) in the veiling of virgins (Hunter, *Marriage* 33). He accused Siricius and Ambrose of Manicheism.<sup>141</sup> Jovinian argued that marriage’s goodness was confirmed by Christ in Matthew 19:5 (Jerome *adv. Jov.* 1.5 tr. NPNF2 6:348), and modeled by the patriarchs of Genesis. He won supporters in Rome among priests and the senatorial class, of whom some were named by the papal condemnation in 393 (Hunter, “Resistance” 48 citing Siricius *ep.* 2.2.3; and *pecc. mer.* 3.1). One reason for the controversy was that Siricius was the first bishop of Rome (from 384 to 399) to advocate celibacy for all priests, and he recorded in a letter that some Italian bishops opposed this idea and were using the precedent of married priests in the Old Testament as an argument.

Jerome’s intemperate reply seemed to vindicate Jovinian’s claim that advocacy of celibacy led to denigration of marriage. Augustine engaged the issue in 404 with two books which should be read together: *De bono conjugali* on marriage, and *De sancta virginitate*.<sup>142</sup> The first identifies three goods of marriage: *bonum sacramenti* (as a symbol of Christ and the church), *bonum fidei* (the friendship between husband and wife), and *bonum prolis* (the offspring brought up for Christ). Augustine asserted that marriage is good, and celibacy is better. He advised that one “must not flee from marriage as if it were a pit of sin, but must pass over it as a hill of less grandeur, to settle on the higher mountain of celibacy” (*virg.* 18 tr. WSA I/9:78). He warned virgins that they should,

not disdain the early fathers and mothers of God’s people ... who served the future Christ even by having children ... [as] future events ... were still being prepared and brought to birth, and even their married life had the character of prophecy ... In the present times, however, those to whom it is said, If they are unable to be continent, they should marry ... do not need our encouragement, but our sympathy. (*virg.* 1 tr. WSA I/9:68)

Some of Jovinian’s arguments were similar to those Augustine had used against Manichees, but he went further. Jovinian claimed that “Sarah, who was a

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141. In the late 380s in Rome the Manichees conducted an evangelistic campaign, and their superior asceticism was advertised. Christian ascetics may have been trying to counter this by outdoing it (Hunter, “Resistance” 50, 53).

142. Previously dated to AD 401, Hombert and Hunter now date these two books to 404.



type of the church ... exchanged the curse of sterility for the blessing of childbirth” (Jerome, *adversus Jovinianum* 1.5 tr. Hunter, *Marriage* 33). Augustine regarded Jovinian’s error as being in the opposite direction from the Manichees (Hunter, “Reclaiming” 325), so he adjusted his earlier arguments defending the OT patriarchs, to point out clearly the dispensational differences between old and new covenants, and the dangers of praising external features of the patriarchs’ lives as if they were suitable models for Christian readers to imitate.

Augustine affirmed the belief in differences in heavenly reward (homily on John 14 tr. NPNF1.7:324; also see Matthew 16:27; 25:14-30; Romans 2: 5-6; and 1 Corinthians 3:11-15). Augustine doubts Jerome’s reading that the thirty, sixty and hundred fold yields in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-20) as representing the greater rewards for widowhood and celibacy. Elizabeth Clark cites that as evidence of Augustine elevating marriage, but it is only a hesitation about the particular text. Augustine suggests that as “God in his kindness grants many gifts, and some are greater and better than others ... should we conclude that there are too many for them to be divided into three kinds?” There are more gifts: and a list includes martyrdom, virginity, widowhood and non-virginal celibacy (Augustine was in this category), as well as continence in marriage, and married chastity (that is, married people who only engage in sex for reproduction). There are differences in status. Married women even if senior in age and senatorial in class have a lower place than virgins. These real differences, Augustine suggested, should not cause jealousy:

See how that Lamb walks on the path of virginity! ... the faithful who are unable to follow the Lamb this far, will see you ... but they will not be jealous. They will not be able to sing that new hymn that is exclusively yours, but they will be able to hear it and to share your enjoyment ... Those who have less will not be resentful toward you. Where there is no envy, there is harmony in diversity. (*virg.* 29 tr. WSA I/9:86)

### **The dispute with Julian of Eclanum**

In the twenty years before Augustine’s death most of his polemical works were aimed at Pelagianism,<sup>143</sup> including his controversies with Julian of Eclanum, one of the bishops who refused to assent to bishop Zosimus’ condemnation of Pelagius in

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143. The various ideas of some Christians, including a number of bishops, construed by Augustine as a system of thought led by the British ascetic Pelagius.

417. The first anti-Pelagian work was *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* (*pecc. mer.*) in 411. Others cited here are *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (*nupt. et conc.*) written between 418 and 420, and *Contra Julianum* (*c. Jul.*) in 422. The controversy raised issues relevant to my *ressourcement*.

Julian claimed that everyone is born, like Adam, still able to choose right or wrong. In his view human nature was not altered by the Fall, and so the phenomena Augustine regarded as results of the Fall (pain of childbirth, sweat of toil, and man's domination of woman) were original according to Julian, who identified the root of the sinful character that enslaved each generation as depraved human culture (rather than nature) passed down from ancestors by imitation.

Augustine answered that Adam's corrupted nature and vitiated seed meant that all his descendants were born defective. He complained that his Pelagian critics

keep shouting in a most hateful manner that we condemn marriage and the divine work by which God creates human beings from men and women. One of their reasons is that we say that those who are born from such a union contract original sin ... we claim that, regardless of the sort of parents from whom the children are born, they are still under the power of the devil, unless they are reborn in Christ. (*nupt. et conc.* 1.1 tr. WSA I/24:28)

Julian and others called this anti-marriage and Manichean. Augustine remarked: "You say I praise the celibacy of the Christian era, not to inspire men to virginity, but to condemn the goodness of marriage" (*c. Jul.* 16(65) tr. FC 303). Julian's focus on Genesis 1:28 (and 2:24) and reproduction (Clark, "*Heresy*" 120) ensured that Augustine kept writing on this topic and these verses to the end of his life. He died before finishing his second book *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*.

## **Reproduction: past, present and future**

Scholarly discussion of Augustine's thought on reproduction has focused on his change of mind about its origin, expressed in his innovative exegesis of Genesis 1:28. Earlier Christian thinking about reproduction's origin was based on an idea that

the future state would restore what had been lost in Eden.<sup>144</sup> Combined with belief that the resurrected are single (Luke 20:35) and “like the angels” (Mark 12:25), this meant the original state was immortal and virginal. Gregory of Nyssa reasoned that “the resurrection promises ... the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state ... If then the life of those restored is closely related to that of the angels, it is clear that the life before the transgression was a kind of angelic life” (*The Making of Man* 17.2 tr. NPNF2 5:66). Christians followed a tradition (from *Jubilees*) in which “Eden was like a temple and sex was not possible within its precincts” (G. Anderson 62).<sup>145</sup> That reproduction did not occur until after expulsion from the garden (Genesis 4:1) confirmed this. A potential problem was that 1:28 preceded 3:15 but it was argued that God had foreseen the Fall and made provision for it.

The change in Augustine’s exegesis has been closely tracked by historians. His earliest comment on “be fruitful and multiply” was in 388, when he asked: “Should we understand it carnally or spiritually? For we are permitted to understand it spiritually and to believe that it was changed into carnal fecundity after sin.” He judged that “before they sinned” the first humans were to multiply “spiritual offspring of intelligible and immortal joys filling the earth” (*Gn. adv. Man.* 1.19(30) tr. FC 84:77-78). A decade later in *Confessiones*, he suggested: “If we consider these words as intended figuratively, which I rather think Scripture intended ... we would understand ... human procreation in terms of matters conceived intellectually, on account of the fecundity of reason” (*conf.* 12.36).

The change began in 401 when he expressed “many different opinions” about the original human condition in Genesis 1:28 including that “the first parents both were mortal in their original state” and would have reproduced, or they might “have children in some other way, without physical union.” He affirmed the principle that “sexual union is possible only for mortal bodies” (*b. conjug.* 2 tr. WSA I/9:33). Then

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144. There was diversity in earlier ideas. Cohen finds three views: 1) sexuality in Eden was allegory, represented by Origen; 2) mortality and sex a result of the Fall, represented by Gregory of Nyssa; and 3) humans in Eden were not yet immortal and not ready for sexuality, represented by Irenaeus of Lyons and Theodore of Mopsuestia (Cohen 235-42).

145. There are many parallels between OT descriptions of the garden of Eden and the temple sanctuary (Wenham, “Sanctuary”), indicating their similarity.

in *De Genesi ad Litteram* in 405 he decided the original plan must have been sexual reproduction by immortals (Harrison 163). Looking back from *Retractationes* he wrote of his earlier view that “I do not at all agree” (Cohen 243). In his new view, if the Fall had not happened sexual reproduction would have been rational, until “the determined number would be complete” (*Gn. litt.* 9.3). In this hypothetical scenario:

children ... would succeed their parents, who themselves would not be destined to die. Thus, finally, the earth would have been filled with immortal men, and when this just and holy society would be thus brought into being, as we believe it will be after the resurrection, there would be an end to the begetting of children. (*Gn. litt.* 1.16 tr. ACW 41:97)

### **Significance of the changed exegesis**

Three questions are considered here. Why did Augustine change his mind about Genesis 1:28? What significance, if any, did his changed ideas about origins have for his attitude to contemporary reproduction? Did it indicate a turn away from his spiritual exegesis of other OT fruitful verses? Patristic scholars disagree about the motive, and the implications. Peter Brown sees it as a “vendetta” against Plotinus, turning away from the hierarchy of spirit and flesh. Margaret Miles responds that Brown overstates his case and offers examples of soul/body hierarchy from later writings (Brown and Donovan 5-9, 19). David Hunter claims it was provoked by Julian, whereas Elizabeth Clark argues it was a response to Jovinian (“Heresy” 108), which is more plausible given the timing. Susan Schreiner considers that Augustine by setting Paradise in the continuum of real history “attacks Neoplatonic devaluation of history” in order to defend the transcendence of God (“Eve” 158). In any case it seems unlikely that his motive was pro-reproductive.

Augustine’s changed view about the origins of reproduction never detracts from his belief that it has no future, and that this points to a proleptic celibate ideal for the present. Virginity is “a foretaste of eternal incorruptibility” (*virg.* 13 tr. WSA I/9:74). He affirms in the 420s that “in the resurrection there will be no generation” (*civ. Dei* 15.17 tr. Bettenson 627). Augustine preached at Lent *circa* 420:

As for those of you who have taken vows ... you are leading the life of angels on earth. Angels, you see, don’t get married ... That’s what we shall all be like, when we have risen from the dead. How much better you people are, then, who already begin to be before death what everyone will be after the resurrection! ... God is keeping for you your respective honors. The resurrection of the dead has been compared to the stars ... (1 Cor.15:41-42).

There will be one splendor there for virginity, another for married chastity, another for holy widowhood. (*serm.* 132.3 tr. WSA III/4:327)

Augustine's shift in exegesis of Genesis 1:28 was a move from one scheme of primordial history to another. It did not, *contra* Cohen, supersede figurative and spiritual exegeses of Genesis chapters 1:28. Cohen, assuming a text has one meaning, argued that medieval exegetes such as Aquinas and the *Glossa Ordinaria* compilers were contradicting Augustine when they rehearsed both his literal and spiritual readings, but Augustine in *de Genesi ad litteram* noted

three generally held opinions about this topic; one held by those who think Paradise should only be understood in the literal material sense, another by those for whom only the spiritual sense is true, the third by those who take Paradise in each way<sup>146</sup> ... [and] it is the third opinion which I favor. (*Gn. litt.* 8.1-2 tr. WSA I/13:346)

The historical meaning is the first elementary and preliminary step. In itself it may not be edifying, but a wealth of spiritual, figurative, and typological interpretations await beyond it. Augustine wrote in the same commentary that:

In the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, or whether it must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened. No Christian will dare say that the narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense. (*Gn. litt.* 1.17 tr. ACW 1:39)

He continues: "in this book I wanted to see what I could accomplish in the laborious and difficult task of literal interpretation." Accordingly at a later point he arrests himself from straying into figurative exegesis: "But this is to give an interpretation, a thing which I did not set out to do in this treatise, I have started here to discuss Sacred Scripture according to the plain meaning of the historical facts, not according to future events which they foreshadow" (*Gn. litt.* 1.17.34 tr. ACW 1:41).

He had written in his first Genesis commentary that "this whole discourse must first be discussed according to history, then according to prophecy" (*Gn. adv. Man.* 2.3 tr. ACW 1:95). His attempt at history *Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (394) had halted at Genesis 1:26; then he did more prophetic exegesis in *Confessiones* chapters 12-13; and now (*Gn. Litt.*) he fills in the missing history. The spiritual exegesis that he did (and will continue to do) stands. Except for the specific point

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146. Here "in each way" means in both ways, allowing multiple meanings.

about when reproduction began, *De Genesi ad litteram* supplements earlier (and later) spiritual interpretation. He commented late in life (*circa* 421) on Genesis 1:28 that “all of these things can appropriately be given a spiritual meaning” on top of the historical meaning (*civ. Dei* 14.22). Spiritual exegeses of other fruitful verses continued in his later works and some will be cited.

### **Progress from old ways to new life**

Augustine used two complementary models, both drawn from earlier writers, to explain why the imperative at 1:28 is historically contingent. The binary model is that the OT patriarchs were commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” whereas now Christians are counseled to not do that. Augustine preached in 409 on how then and now differ, in general, like the prescriptions of the divine doctor. “The doctor visits the patient, and says, ‘Take this one in the morning, and that one in the afternoon.’ ... So in the same sort of way, then, some things were good for the benefit of the human race in earlier times, other things are good in later times.” Augustine imagines a query: “And the patient comes back to the doctor with, ‘Why not the same one in the afternoon as in the morning?’ ... my dear sick man, don’t start giving the doctor advice!” (*serm.* 374.16 tr. WSA III/11:402). Different instructions were given for the dawn of human history than applied later in the day.

God’s word alone should suffice, but explanation can be supplied. One purpose of reproduction was to establish Israel, so the nation could give birth to prophets who bring revelation; and ultimately to Christ. “Sarah too should be seen as acting from the pious motive of wanting the Israelite race to be increased” (*c. Faust.* 22.30-31, 47 tr. WSA I/19). He claimed in 418 that “Abraham was fully imbued with faith in the incarnation” (Hunter 333 citing *gr. et pecc. or.* 2.27). This is similar to Luther’s idea of a messianic motive for patriarchal reproduction. But for Augustine this also fitted the difference between the times “since it was necessary that Christ come in the flesh, both the marriage of Sarah and the virginity of Mary served to propagate that flesh” (*c. Secirca* 2). Another purpose was hermeneutic, that the scriptural accounts of patriarchs’ marriages exist to serve figuratively as prophecy of the marriage of Christ and the church, and the promises and narratives of their genealogies to serve as prophecies of the the gospel’s spread. “Not only the words of these holy men ... but also their lives, their wives, their children, and acts ... signified spiritual

mysteries closely associated with Christ and the Church of which those saints were members” (*cat. rud.* 19.33). Augustine wrote in 421 that:

This propagation of children which among the ancient saints was a duty for begetting a people for God, amongst whom the prophecy of Christ’s coming had precedence over everything, now has no longer the same necessity. For from among all nations the way is open for an abundant offspring to receive spiritual regeneration, from whatever quarter they derive their natural birth. (*nupt. et conc.* 1.13)

In the progressive model, the urgency of reproduction gradually diminished even during the Old Testament period. In the earliest periods after Adam and Noah they had to establish a human presence spread across the land. That had been accomplished long ago. Therefore early practices such as marriage to close relatives and polygamy were virtuous then but were prohibited even before Christ. Genesis indicated “men took their sisters as wives ... a decent procedure under the pressure of necessity; but it became reprehensible in later times” (*civ. Dei* 15.16 tr. Bettenson 623). He also suggests that this progressive reduction of fertility continues during the Christian era, spreading from Jesus and Paul, to the growing evangelistic celibate movement of his own time. “For who does not know that the multitude of Christian men of perfect continence is daily spreading farther and farther, throughout the entire world, and especially in the East and in Egypt” (*mor.* 1.65). Elizabeth Clark observes that from Augustine’s perspective the greatest outpouring of the Spirit so far had been in the 4th century (147).

#### **Advancing from reproduction to continence**

This progress might be mirrored in individual life histories. Within the span of a marriage a couple might begin with reproduction but later become continent while still biologically fertile. In the 4th century West, married men ordained in middle age often became continent. Ambrose expected that although they “have had sons” they should “not continue to make sons” (Harrison 188). Augustine *circa* 420 recommended this for non-ordained people, and praised married couples who “observe a perpetual abstinence” (*nupt. et conc.* 12 tr. NPNF1 5). Augustine was the first writer in the west to say Joseph and Mary had a real (celibate) marriage. A similar pattern was found in the story of Moses and Zipporah. He wrote in 418 that “we know many brothers and sisters bearing much fruit in grace, who by mutual consent withhold from each other in the name of Christ the desire of the flesh, but do

not withhold from each other their mutual married love. The more the former is held in check, the stronger grows the latter” (*serm.* 51.21 tr. WSA I/24:33). Examples known to him included Therasia and Paulinus, and also Melania the Younger who wished her marriage to be continent from the beginning but agreed to her husband Pinianus’ wish to produce a male heir for his family’s sake. After one daughter and a dead son, they became celibate partners (Brown, *Body* 409).

Roman society, mainly to maintain property inheritance, disapproved of this behaviour and sometimes intervened legally. Augustine wrote: “Heaven forbid that in the case of those who have decided by mutual consent permanently to abstain from the use of carnal concupiscence the marital bond between them is broken. In fact, it will be stronger to the extent that they have entered more deeply into those agreements with each other” (*nupt. et conc.* 1.11 tr. WSA I/24:35). He emphasized the need for mutual agreement and by letter reprimanded Ecdicia, who dragooned her husband into continence, which he accepted, but then when she started giving away their money he turned to adultery. Augustine reminded her of Paul’s teaching on the “marital debt” owed between husband and wife (*ep.* 262 tr. WSA II/4).

Augustine also stated that after the death of one partner it is good to remain single. Widowhood is a counsel not a command. He criticized Tertullian for making it a rule, and condemned the “Catharii or Novatians ... [who] do not allow second marriages” (*haer.* 38 tr. WSA I/18:111). Augustine commended a widow who was “at an age when she could still marry and have children if she wanted to, and she then embraced chastity as a widow” (*b. vid.* 14 tr. WSA II/4:124). When Augustine’s sister was widowed she became abbess of a community of women in Hippo (AE 354 citing *ep.* 211.4; and Possidius, *vita Augustini* 26).

### **Spiritual exegesis, and celibate fertility**

Augustine throughout his career used spiritual, figurative, and allegorical exegesis to find deeper meaning in Scriptures that, on the surface, concerned biological fertility. In the 420s, Augustine noted of the promise that Abraham’s progeny would number like dust that it is “hyperbole ... [for] how incomparably greater is the number of the sands than the number of all human beings can possibly be, from Adam himself to the end of the world.” He adds that it refers to physical and spiritual descendants, “the whole seed of Abraham” (*civ. Dei* XVI.21 tr. Bettenson



679). However of the promise (Genesis 15:15) that Abraham's seed will number like the stars, Augustine suggests that "God's promise refers to a spiritual posterity in heavenly beatitude" (*civ. Dei* XVI.23 tr. Bettenson 681).

He also used allegory. Preaching on Psalm 127:3-5 the man with a quiver full of sons is Christ, the sons are disciples, and the arrows sent far by the Lord's bow are apostles (*en. Ps.* 126.10 tr. WSA III/20:93).<sup>147</sup> Augustine taught that Psalm 128:3 is best interpreted spiritually. The wife like a fruitful vine is the church, and the sons like olive-shoots at the Lord's table are (through intertextual reading with Matthew 5:9) the peacemakers for it is they who shall be called the children of God (*en. Ps.* 127[8].13 tr. WSA III/20:111). Augustine offers an alternative interpretation of the children and grandchildren mentioned in the Psalm:

What do your children represent? The works you perform here. Who then are your children's children? The fruits of those works. If you give alms they are your children; but because you gave alms you receive eternal life, and that is what your children's children stand for. (*en. Ps.* 127[8].16 tr. WSA III/20:115)

Augustine wrote in 428: "The name of sons is interpreted in three ways in the Scriptures." Apart from the obvious way "according to nature" one might have sons "according to teaching, as the Apostle calls his own sons those to whom he has taught the Gospel." A third way is "according to imitation" when one hears of a saint's faith and follows (*retr.* tr. FC 60:94). Earlier he wrote that "virginity is no obstacle to fertility" and that: "No one gives birth to consecrated virgins except a consecrated virgin" (*virg.* 2, 12 tr. WSA I/9:69, 74). Fertility is not only about the number converted but also personal fruits of the spirit:

Nor should you count yourselves barren because you remain virgins; since this very integrity of the flesh, chosen for love, contributes to the fruitfulness of the mind. Do what the apostle says: since you are not thinking of the affairs of the world, how to please husbands, think of the affairs of God, how to please him in all things, so that instead of wombs fruitful with offspring, you may have minds fruitful with all the virtues. (*serm.* 191.4 tr. WSA III/6:44)

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147. The difference in Psalm numbering (126 for 127, and 127 for 128) is due to the old Latin numbering which Augustine used being one less between Psalms 10 and 148 than in Hebrew and in modern English Bibles (Green, Preface xxiv).

### ***Ressourcement* contrasted with natalism**

In this part I practise *ressourcement* from Augustine for the categories of natalist argument described in chapter 2, but first I consider an aspect of his thought which affects much of what follows. What is the good that a person and a society ought to seek? His answer is that “eternal life is the Supreme Good, and eternal death is the Supreme Evil” (*civ. Dei* 19.4). Temporal blessings are good, but not if they detract from pursuit of the supreme good. On reproduction, Augustine observes material interpretations of the “fruitful wife” and “children like young sprouting olives” in Psalm 128, and warns “do not lose heavenly happiness by pursuing temporal, earthly well-being” (*en. Ps.* 127[8].2 tr. WSA III/20.99).

Augustine would not accept that simply adding more quantity of a temporal good is necessarily better. For all things there are appropriate limits “by measure, number, and weight” and Augustine liked the maxim: “nothing in excess” (AE 204). He advised that the “indulgence of the bodily appetites is intended to secure the continued existence and the invigoration of the individual or of the species. If the appetites go beyond ... the limits of temperance, they become unlawful” (*c. Faust.* 22.29 tr. NPNF1 4). There he is writing about food, but the concept could well be applied to reproduction. The concept of *incontinentia* covers any inordinate love and accumulation of God’s good gifts and has been related to greedy consumption and ecological sustainability by Gerald Schlabach.

### **Perpetuating society and family**

The desire to perpetuate a human society (whether it be nation, city, or family) is minimally the hope that some people will reproduce so that society continues. This does not seek exponential or absolute increase in population and (above the level of a family) it does not impose an obligation on particular individuals. Augustine in 388 deployed against Manicheism an argument that continuity of species is a benefit of reproduction, for all species “by that blessing preserve their kind by giving birth” (*Gn. adv. Man.* 15.50 tr. FC 84:180). Responding to the controversy about Jovinian in 401 he granted that reproduction does “contribute to the continuation of the human race” (*b. conjug.* 9 tr. WSA I/9:40). However he added:

It is good to bear children and be the mother of a family; but not marrying is better because to have no need of this task is even better for human society ... There is no shortage of offspring ... so holy friendships may be fostered. What this means is that in the earliest ages of the human race, especially because of the need to propagate the people of God, through whom the Prince and Savior of all peoples would be proclaimed and be born, holy persons had a duty to make use of that benefit of marriage ... Now, however, since among all peoples everywhere there is an abundant provision of the spiritual kinship required for creating a true and holy society, even those who desire to marry solely for the sake of having children should be advised to avail themselves rather of the greater benefit of abstinence. (*b. conjug.* 9 tr. WSA I/9:41)

Augustine does not make clear whether the “holy society” envisaged is the whole communion of saints, or only those walking the earth at a particular moment. Is the raw material for regeneration into a holy society already sufficient, or must that production be maintained in each future generation? If the latter then an implication would be that if at a future time there were very few new offspring being born one would have to either rescind commendation of singleness, or discard this particular argument. Augustine did not consider this implication, but in the 13th century Latin scholastic writers did entertain such questions (Biller 120).

The perpetuation of the whole species was a philosophical concern, but at the smaller scale of a nation or city it was a common worry of ancient politicians, as noted earlier in this chapter. Aware of the accusation that Christianity had weakened the empire Augustine in general emphasized patriotic duty (AE 197 citing *ep.* 91.1) but this did not extend to reproduction. He wrote that “if it is part of a wise man’s duty (and this is something which I have not yet discovered for certain) to devote himself to children, the man who takes a wife for this sole reason can seem to me worthy of admiration, but not of imitation” (WSA I/9:10). In later years Augustine gave less weight to patriotism.

At the smallest scale, one’s family line, to seek perpetuity was a common goal among ancient Romans. The consul Cassius Dio rejoiced *circa* 225 “Is it not blessed, on departing from life, to leave behind as heir to your line and fortune one that is your own, produced by you, and to have only the mortal part of you waste away while you live on in the child?” (Rawson 100). Augustine discerned this path to

immortality to be a delusion, and commented on the text “see your children’s children” in Psalm 128:5 (whose figurative exegesis was treated above):

And consider this: Have your children been born to you in order to live with you on earth? Or to supplant you and oust you? Can you rejoice over the birth of those who are born only to push you aside? All new-born children tacitly say to their parents, “Get out of the way, it’s our show now.” (*en. Ps.* 127[8] tr. WSA III/20:112)

### **Multiplying for cornucopia and expansion**

Natalists claim that increasing population is intrinsically good because people are the image of God. Cornucopians add that a rising population stimulates economic growth. The vision of continuous increase is uniquely modern, but a *ressourcement* against this secularized eschatology can be made. The root of imperial ambition in Augustine’s history of Rome, and driv of the City of Man, is *libido dominandi* (the will to power), an important motif for Augustine (Markus, *Saeculum* xvi; Kretzmann and Stump 23). It is not a virtue, but a sin and delusion.

Augustine is not optimistic about worldly material progress. One aspect of this was his understanding of the old age of the world and humankind. For example, he writes that “Christ came in the sixth age of the human race, as it were, in its old age” (*En. Ps.* 92.1 tr. WSA III/18:361). He observed that “old age usually lasts as long as all the other ages together ... Therefore, in regard to the final age of mankind ... it is uncertain how many generations are reckoned to it” (*div. qu.* tr. FC 70:107). That did not, according to Robert Markus, imply moral decline: “Growing old did not mean decline for Augustine. The analogy has no implications with regard to the quality of the world’s old age” (*Saeculum* 25). There is however a physical decline. Though the Spirit advances, human height is shrinking for he reports that “the bodies of men in general were much larger at that time than ours are now ... as the centuries pass and the world gets older, the bodies produced by nature become smaller and smaller” (*civ. Dei* 15.9 tr. Bettenson 610). In this long sixth age of humankind it is vanity to hope for an empire as great as those of the past.

Following a major strand of Christian tradition, Augustine asserted that the original “likeness” to God was lost in the Fall (AE 441 citing *retr.* 2.24), and though a “spark” of reason shows that the *imago Dei* “has not been utterly quenched” it is defective (*civ. Dei* 22.24). The likeness can be restored only by Christ, through the

church's sacraments. Therefore increasing the quantity of births does not in itself increase the quantity of the divine image unless they are subsequently regenerated, which I discuss in the section below on eternal destiny.

### **Strengthening the visible church**

Some natalists advocate high fecundity by Christians because it strengthens Christianity (politically) relative to other religions. Augustine's association of his "two cities" motif with OT genealogies seems at first sight amenable to this idea. He outlined the *City of God* as "a summary of the origins of both these cities" that would go on to "describe their development from the time when that first pair begin to produce offspring up to the time when mankind will cease to reproduce itself" (*civ. Dei* 15.1 tr. Bettenson 595). Later in that work he referred to the "two lines of descent of the human race," and observed that "the genealogies of the two societies are recorded separately, one deriving from Cain the fratricide, the other from the brother called Seth" (*civ. Dei* 15.8 tr. Bettenson 608). This sounds like a tribal vision insofar as none of the godly species are from Cain's line. However, only some of Seth's descendants were godly. Augustine suggests that the names listed (Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah) are the one from each Sethite generation who turned to godliness. Given the advanced age of the fathers recorded at the time of each birth, Augustine concludes that there were large numbers of Sethite offspring (*civ. Dei* 15.20 tr. Bettenson 631), but only a few good ones. Further, they "all became bad enough to be wiped out by the flood, except for one righteous man" (*civ. Dei* 15.8 tr. Bettenson 608). Of the period before Abraham, he asked "whether the progress of the Holy City can be traced in a continuous line after the Flood" and noted that "the record is silent about any righteous men ... [for] more than a thousand years" (*civ. Dei* 16.1 tr. Bettenson 649). So there is no genetic lineage here. Augustine later clarified that the contrast between the descendants of Cain and Seth merely "gave an appropriate picture of the two cities" (*civ. Dei* 15.21 tr. Bettenson 635 Cf. Genesis 4:26.) and, although based on history, it was a rhetorical device by the author of Genesis. When Augustine writes that "the City of God has even in this world many thousands of citizens who abstain from the act of procreation" (*civ. Dei* 15.20 tr. Bettenson 625) it is not as a lament about competitive disadvantage, but as a sign of hope.

The modern natalist argument implies a belief that biological reproduction is the most effective way of adding members to the church. Augustine wrote *circa* 420: “No longer is God’s people to be propagated by carnal generation; but, henceforth, it is to be gathered out by spiritual regeneration” (*nupt. et conc.* 15 tr. NPNF1 5:270). In another writing he discerned that the time for reproducing had been superseded by a time for gathering in those people already sown. One of the arguments Jovinian used in support of his claim that marriage has as much merit as celibacy, was that it produces Christians.<sup>148</sup> Augustine countered with this *reductio ad absurdum*:

What then if some rich woman spends a great deal of money on the good work of buying slaves of various nations in order to make them Christian? Will she not procure the birth of members for Christ more abundantly and fruitfully than would be possible from her womb, however fertile? She still will not dare to compare her money to the gift of holy virginity. Yet if physical motherhood truly makes up for lost virginity, because the children born become Christians, there will be even more to be gained from this enterprise if the loss of virginity is in return for payment of a large sum of money. With that money a much greater number of children can be purchased, to become Christians, than could be born from one woman’s womb, however prolific. (*virg.* 9 tr. WSA I/9:72)

Augustine did not think slave-buying or motherhood appropriate or effective methods. He admitted that one could add members to the church in these ways, but the primary means were preaching and holy life. Augustine wrote of the apostles “begetting children through the preaching of the gospel” (*en. Ps.* 44.23 tr. WSA III/16:301). Commenting on Psalm 40:6 “I proclaimed and I spoke; they were multiplied beyond counting,” he claimed “it’s happening now; the gospel is being proclaimed, Christians are multiplying beyond counting.” (*serm.* 229m.1, Friday before Easter 412, tr. WSA III/6:316).

Augustine observed that in his time “the human race is converging on the name of the crucified and streaming together ... It’s high time for all and sundry to be inside. Now just a few have remained outside” (*serm.* 354a.25 tr. WSA III/11:382). His motive for bringing everyone inside was not to strengthen the church, nor that all were saved, but because *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, anyone left outside the church had no hope. Membership was necessary but not sufficient for salvation. The two

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148. Jovinian alone used this to argue that marriage has as much merit as celibacy.

cities are both inside for “many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are collected in the net of the Gospel ... [and] both swim ... in the net until brought ashore” on Judgement Day (*civ. Dei* 18.49). Markus notes Augustine’s “protest against the readiness to see within any society the ultimate eschatological conflict prematurely revealed” (*Saeculum* 101). Since one cannot even see or count the members of the two cities mingled inside the visible church, a sectarian project to outnumber outsiders is not viable or meaningful.

### **Eternal destination of Christians’ offspring**

Some natalists argue Christian parents should raise their fecundity to increase Heaven’s population. A counter-argument inspired by Augustine’s thought considers the consequent parallel increase in Hell’s population. The question is whether a rise in biological reproduction would add more to endless torment than to eternal bliss? Put differently, will most (or at least half) of church members’ offspring ultimately be added to Heaven’s population? There are various ways to make that scenario imaginable, but Augustine suggests problems in each line of reasoning.

If all the offspring of Christian parents were automatically born Christian, as Julian of Eclanum claimed, that would be a good start toward most reaching Heaven. Augustine however responds that “our offspring are born as children of the present world” (*nupt. et conc.* 1.18; *c. Jul.* 6.13.40). Biological reproduction cannot transmit regeneration. Due to Adam’s sin “the whole of mankind is a *massa damnata*; for he who committed the first sin was punished, and along with him all the stock which had its roots in him” (*civ. Dei* 21.12 tr. Bettenson 989; *c. Jul.* 16.4 tr. FC 35:111). Augustine offers an illustration from horticulture: seedlings from cultivated grafted olive trees always revert to the wild form, which is comparatively fruitless (*nupt. et conc.* 2.58). Our “parents, in giving us birth, bear us to eternal death, because of the ancient fault” (*serm.* 216). Christian parents are not privileged, because “what is born of the flesh is flesh ... if they do not receive that rebirth [baptism], righteous parents will do them no good” (*pecc. mer.* 2.9 tr. NPNF1 5:88).

Baptism removes the guilt and penalty of original sin (*retr.* 199), but even if all parents have their infants baptized only a minority would ultimately be saved. First, Augustine was aware that many die before baptism, either in the womb, or in the days after birth. He observed in 411 that “mothers come running to church when

their babies are ill” (*en. Ps.* 51 tr. WSA III/17:418). He observed that “God does not wish to admit to His kingdom that immense number of infants who die without baptism” (*c. Jul.* 6.43 tr. FC 35:206). Julian responded that if it were so it would be better if they had never been conceived. Augustine refused to concede this: “I do not say that children who die without the baptism of Christ will undergo such grievous punishment that it were better for them never to have been born ... who can doubt that nonbaptized infants, having only original sin and no burden of personal sins, will suffer the lightest condemnation of all?” (*c. Jul.* 5.11.44, tr. FC 35:285). Nevertheless this punishment would be endless in duration, and Augustine in a letter to Jerome in 415 expressed his distress regarding “the condemnation of so many thousands of souls, which in the deaths of infant children leave this world without the benefit of the Christian sacrament” (*ep.* 166 tr. NPNF1 1:525).

Most conservative Evangelicals (and therefore probably most natalist writers) believe that all *concepti*,<sup>149</sup> every human life from the moment of conception, has an eternal destiny in heaven or hell. Modern scientific knowledge reveals that even in healthy women only a small fraction of *concepti* survive to birth, including at least half that fail even to implant on the womb. This dwarfs the occasional losses before baptism known to Augustine, and would tip the balance of eternal destinies in his doctrine even more heavily towards hell.

Even if those dying before baptism is set aside as a special case,<sup>150</sup> infant baptism does not solve the problem of the hell/heaven balance because it does not guarantee salvation. In early 5th century Roman Christianity there may have been a popular idea that people were “incorporated” into the church “by birth and (infant) baptism, not by an act of conscious and deliberate decision ... Christians are no longer made but born” (Markus, *Christianity* 26). Augustine, however, refuted the idea that baptism automatically saves (*civ. Dei* 21.19; 21.25; and see Daley 223). Augustine regarded the visible church as a *corpus permixtum* comprised of wheat and tares (Harrison 220 citing *en. Ps.* 61.6), for “the identity of the predestined elect

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149. I use the term *concepti* as a neutral description for what science calls a fertilized egg, and what many Evangelicals regard as a recently conceived baby.

150. Which modern Catholic and Lutheran theology does.



of the city of God is unknown in this life ... [and] they share ... in some cases, the same family” (*civ. Dei* 19.17; also see 21.23; 22.24). Preaching at the Easter vigil after 412, Augustine advised:

Don’t be surprised, either, at how many bad Christians there are, who fill the church, who communicate at the altar ... The Church of this time, you see, is compared to a threshing-floor, having on it grain mixed with chaff, having bad members mixed with good ... Every day people who seemed to be good fall away and perish; and again, ones who seemed to be bad are converted and live. (*serm.* 233.2 tr. WSA III/7:210)

So the destiny even of baptized children is unknown. Augustine, responding to Julian referred to “the pious parents you so eloquently urge to procreate” and noted wryly that “we must attribute to parents their wish to have children, although they know nothing of their future” (*c. Jul.* 5.11.44 tr. FC 35:285-6). That uncertainty might cause parents to hesitate before conceiving a child.

Natalists might press on with confidence that at least more will be saved than lost, but Augustine suggests a chilling thought: perhaps even among the baptized less than half will be saved. By the 410s most of the residents of Carthage province, and of the empire, were members of the Catholic church, and from 416 an imperial law required the baptism of infants. Yet still in the mid 420s Augustine considered the godly were “a mere few, in comparison with the multitude of the ungodly” (*civ. Dei* 16.21 tr. Bettenson 679), and discerned that “there are many more condemned by vengeance than are released by mercy” (*civ. Dei* 21.12 tr. Bettenson 989). “There are a few among Christians who live good lives, many among Christians who live bad lives ... This threshing floor is going to be winnowed, there will be a huge pile of chaff, but there will also appear a shining mass of saints” (*serm.* 299a.9 tr. WSA III/11:271). The idea that even among church members the saved are few compared to the chaff, is an additional argument against the idea that high birth rates serve the ultimate good by adding to the sum of eternal joy.

Augustine, following earlier Christian writers, thought God had planned before the foundation of the world a fixed number of the redeemed to fill heaven. If Adam had not fallen “there would have come into being a number of saints sufficient to complete the muster of that Blessed City” (*civ. Dei* 14.23 tr. Bettenson 585). After that, God “did not fail to have a plan whereby he might complete the fixed number of

citizens predestined in his wisdom even out of the condemned human race” (*civ. Dei* 14.26 tr. Bettenson 591). This predetermined number is the cumulative total across all generations. Augustine was not eschatologically anxious about how many of the redeemed might be born in his lifetime, as he contemplated the possibility of the secular order continuing for 6,000 years or even “600,000 years, if the mortal state of humanity, with its succession of birth and death, should last so long, and our frailty, with all its ignorance, should endure” (*civ. Dei* 12.13 tr. Bettenson 487). There is no benefit or virtue in increasing the number of births.

### **Choosing the greater blessings**

Natalists argue that children are a blessing, “the more the better” (Provan 28). Augustine identified differing kinds of blessings, spiritual and temporal, greater and lesser. In many cases one has to choose between blessings. In a sermon to celibates at Christmas, *circa* 412, he pointed to the example of the Virgin Mary: “Setting at nought earthly marriages, you have chosen to be virgins ... Imitate her as far as you can; not in her fruitfulness, because you cannot do this and preserve your virginity. She alone was able to have both the gifts, of which you have chosen to have one” (*serm.* 191.2 tr. WSA III/6:43).

The blessing in Psalm 128 superficially refers to biological offspring, but Augustine shows that logically it must refer primarily to spiritual blessings:

How will this God-fearer be blessed? By seeing his wife like a fruitful vine against the sides of his house, and his children like young sprouting olives around his table. Does this mean that people who for God’s sake have renounced marriage have missed their reward? Perhaps a celibate will say, “God blesses me in other ways.” But that will not do: either he blesses you like this or he does not bless you at all, for the psalm plainly says, Lo, this is how anyone who fears the Lord will be blessed.” What does it mean then, brothers and sisters? (*en. Ps.* 127[8].1 tr. WSA III/20:98)

Augustine warned that “carnally-minded persons ... may be tripped up rather than built up by this psalm” if they fail to unpack the “wrapped-up parcel” of its figurative meaning (*en. Ps.* 127[8].1,2), since:

It would be disgraceful ... to refer the promises in our psalm to this-worldly happiness. That would be to say of any faithful follower of God ... who, though married, does not happen to have any children, “That man clearly does not fear the Lord.” ... If we talk like that, we show ourselves to be carnally-minded ... trapped in the love of earthly things.

Augustine then imagines a debate with someone who points to a godless man who dies with many grandchildren as contradiction of the Psalm.

If you look for those good things with earthly eyes, you will be expecting hordes of children and grandchildren, and a wife who is fertile and frequently pregnant. But these are not the good things of the eternal Jerusalem; they are the good things that belong to the land of the dying ... Beware of running after blessings that are not from Zion ... Yes, these temporal things truly are blessings from the Lord ... but do you not see that he has given them to animals as well? That blessing cannot originate *from Zion* ... Remember how even the birds were bidden, Increase and multiply. Can you rate so highly a gift conferred equally on birds? If you are given these temporal blessings, make good use of them; but give more thought to how you are going to bring up the children already born than to having even more. Happiness lies not in merely having children but in having good ones. If they are already born to you, work hard on their upbringing; if they are not born, give thanks to God, because you will perhaps have fewer worries. (*en. Ps.* 127[8].15 tr. WSA III/20:101)

Of the three goods of marriage, the good of offspring is the least. Marriages that are infertile or continent completely lack that good and yet Augustine considered them to be true marriages none the less. The *bonum sacramenti*, symbolizing Christ and His bride, shines from every married couple until the resurrection. The *bonum fidei* can be achieved by every couple “helped by the grace of God.” But if a couple’s offspring are not saved (and this is unknown if the children stay in the church, but manifest if the children leave the church) there is for those parents no *bonum prolis*, but only (I coin the term) a *malum prolis*.

### **Ordinance of God and nature**

Some modern natalists regard “be fruitful and multiply” as a command today. Augustine, as discussed earlier, limited that to the Old Covenant. Instead he poses a choice: “the married, the widowed, the virginal ... Let each of you choose from these three kinds of life whichever you wish” (*serm.* 61.2 tr. WSA III/3:196). This had to be a choice because individuals had different levels of ability and faith in this area. Augustine’s advice closely followed Paul’s in 1 Corinthians 7. He advised that “the only ones who should marry are those who are unable to be continent, in accordance with that advice of the same apostle” (*b. conjug.* 42). Similarly, *circa* 426 he referred to “those men to whom the apostle permitted as a matter of indulgence to have one

wife because of their incontinence” (*doc. Chr.* 18/26). For those who are capable singleness is the better option.

The idea that humankind was originally designed for reproduction does not in Augustine’s thought lead to a “law of nature” such as that presented by Luther in the 1520s, and by modern natalists. Biology does not dictate behaviour when the Spirit rules. In the 420s Augustine wrote that although “man .. is brought [down] to the level of the beasts, and he breeds like the beasts” the created natural order now conveys only “the possibility, not the necessity, of propagation” (*civ. Dei* 22.24 tr. Bettenson 1071). For natalists the default life-path is marital fecundity, but Augustine reverses this: singleness is the norm, the default state. “Do not look for a wife, is a statement of advice, not a commandment; hence to marry is not something wrong to do, but it is better not to do it” (*virg.* 15).

Modern natalists (and Luther in the 1520s) marginalize celibacy as a rare exceptional gift rather than a life-choice. Augustine admitted that “unless God grants it, no one is able to be continent” (*cont.* 192). However this was equally true for married faithfulness: it also is only possible by grace so this is not a valid argument against volunteering for either state. Augustine often refers to celibacy as something one may choose. For example, in sermons at Christmas he addressed the celibate members of his church, remarking in 411 that “you have chosen to be virgins” (*serm.* 191.2 tr. WSA III/6:43), and in 412 that “for Christ’s sake you have declined to give birth” (*serm.* 192.2 tr. WSA III/6:47), and in the 410s that “virgins decide against being mothers” (*serm.* 188.3 tr. WSA III/6:33).

Julian of Eclanum used this acknowledged freedom as an argument for the power of the will to Christian perfection, but Augustine answered,

you say as though to test me: “If you are really inviting men to strive for continence, you will admit that the virtue of chastity can be possessed by those who wish, in such a way that whoever wishes may be holy in body and soul.” I answer that I admit it, but not in your sense. You attribute this to the powers of the soul itself; I attribute it to the will helped by the grace of God. (*c. Jul.* 16 tr. FC 35:303)

Continence is an evangelical counsel that any Christian may choose to accept. Elaine Pagels claims that a “theme of human freedom ... dominates patristic exegesis of Genesis 1-3” but that freedom was “buried” by Augustine (Pagels, “Politics” 68).

Elsewhere however she admits that “freedom from cosmic necessity ... expresses itself most powerfully ... in ... choosing celibacy” (Pagels, “Freedom”). In this respect, compared to the ideas Luther presented in the 1520s, Augustine is an apostle of freedom from necessity. Mary Clark argued that for Augustine “free choice itself was not lost ... human will is never held ‘in bondage’ ... and he did not use the expression ‘natural law’ ” (52, 55).

### **God’s means of forming disciples**

Many natalists regard parenthood as a discipline and the intentionally childless as selfish. Augustine agrees that all must be consecrated to service but its object is the neighbour understood in a wide sense. Augustine regarded loving offspring as an unimpressive form of neighbourly love, merely instinctive. Augustine preached in 397 on the distinctive character of true Christian love:

Can’t you see how mutual love holds sway among irrational animals ... So what’s so great about what you’re doing, if as a human being you want to be with another human being? It’s still no different from the animals in your stable. I don’t know whether that’s the sort of love that God requires of us. Perhaps you’ll say, “I do love my neighbor; after all. I love my son, and as myself.” That’s easy enough too. Tigers love their cubs. After all, none of these animals would reproduce, unless one were loved by another. Go beyond [animal behaviour]. (*serm.* 90a.6 tr. WSA III/11:79)

Seven years later in 404 he preached: “Nor are human beings to be praised for a quality that is to be found in dumb animals ... what is so wonderful about a man loving his son?” (*serm.* 159b.4 tr. WSA III/11:149). Augustine praised those married couples who decided to be perpetually continent, the earlier the better, and regardless of whether they were childless.

My third chapter observed that Luther presented God’s curse as becoming remedially active in childrearing as a soul-saving penitential discipline. Augustine has no such idea, but he agrees childrearing is onerous. Asking what the “supreme good” is in *City of God*, he observed “the number and the gravity of the ills which abound in society and the distresses of our mortal condition? Our philosophers should listen to a character in one of their own comedies ... I married a wife; and misery I found! Children were born; and they increased my cares” (*civ. Dei* 19.5 tr. Bettenson 858). Parenthood is just one of the sources of distress in this world, and

these earthly troubles do not function as a purifying penance but only as a distracting worry. He wrote in 404 that marriage should not be regarded as

something bad and forbidden, but as something burdensome and worrying... In the present age, however, when bearing children physically does not contribute toward the future physical birth of Christ, to undertake for the sake of having a marriage the burden of those afflictions of the flesh that the apostle pronounces to be the lot of those who marry would be utter foolishness. The only exception is for those who lack self-control, if there is danger they will ... fall into mortal sin ... Is there anyone, among those who have tied themselves with the bonds of marriage, who is not tossed and torn by those cares? (*virg.* 16 tr. WSA I/9:76)

## Conclusion

Augustine is significant in Christian thought on reproduction. His ideas developed in the context of controversies: against the Manicheans he justified the reproductive obsessions of the patriarchs of Genesis by finding their purpose in salvation history. To oppose Jovinian he clarified the dispensational distinction between the Old Testament and Christianity. He argued that marriage is good, and celibacy is better. Against the Pelagians he claimed that Christians are not able to give birth to Christians and baptism does not guarantee salvation.

Elizabeth Clark finds in Augustine a “proreproductive and anticontraceptive marital ethic” (“Vitiated” 396). That is two separate claims because, as I showed in chapter 1, there is no logical connection. The second claim is obviously true. As to the first, Augustine may be pro-reproductive by comparison with the Marcionites, Manicheans, Encratites, and many of the Fathers preceding him. However, compared with modern natalists Augustine is anti-reproductive. Strands in early modern and especially 19th century Catholicism, influenced by nationalism, developed a two-tier model of vocation with a small celibate elite, and a lay married majority encouraged to have big families. That model would be alien to Augustine, and to most medieval Christians. Augustine wanted all to aspire to as high a spirituality as possible, to continence within marriage if not to celibacy.

*Ressourcement* from Augustine offers much help. A secular pragmatism about reproduction is found in Augustine’s writings, but it is minimal and trumped by his focus on eternity. Christians have no obligation to perpetuate the City of Man. The church’s future is assured not by biological but by spiritual reproduction. The human

future is assured not by perpetuating the race but by the general resurrection of the dead. Motherhood is a blessing but non-reproductive lives are more blessed. Nature does not dictate motherhood (or fatherhood) and grace enables anyone to follow the apostolic counsel of singleness. Earlier rationales for Christian celibacy had been vulnerable to criticisms like those by Jovinian, but Augustine stabilized the tradition and forestalled any emergence of aggrandizing natalism within Christianity, at least until Luther's demolition work in the 1520s.

So there is much of use against natalism in Augustine's thought as it stands, but without the anti-contraceptive ideas he inherited from Alexandria there would be even more. If one imagines Augustine's thought without that, his high esteem of celibacy would remain, and some of the benefits he perceived in continent marriage could then be ascribed to contraceptive marriage if it was devoted to rational and spiritual fruitfulness. Augustine's non-natalist view is not rooted in his antipathy to sexuality but in his sense of vocation, in God's purposes in history and eschatology, and his relative valuation of different blessings.

Today most heirs of Augustinian thought are selective. Catholicism has departed from his antinatalist tendency but still approves his esteem of celibacy above marriage though it is weak or muted, especially after the scandals of recent years. Its episcopacy and a few laity also still hold to his version of procreationism, but modified to allow the rhythm method (or rather its scientific variant in Natural Family Planning) that Augustine condemned as a Manichean custom. Protestants mostly reject all this, but in other areas they lean on Augustinian ideas, transformed by Luther and Calvin. This ressourcement is a helpful second step in evaluation, but we must move on to ecological interpretation in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6. An ecological critique of natalism

This chapter completes my evaluation of natalist interpretations of the fruitful verses. Chapter 4 weighed them against the original Near Eastern context of those OT verses. Chapter 5 retrieved Augustine's thinking about human fruitfulness. Now in chapter 6 an ecological response to natalist biblical reception will be constructed. The hermeneutic employed here brings together Scripture, classic Christian tradition, and the 21st century context of North American population growth and ecological footprint, to produce an alternative reception of the fruitful verses shaped by concern for biodiversity and sustainability.

This chapter contains the following components. It explains the character of ecological biblical hermeneutics, and justifies its application to the fruitful verses because of the ecological impact of US population size. As the hermeneutic requires a bringing together of Scripture, Christian tradition, and contemporary context, it next introduces the third element, presenting contextual material about demography, biodiversity, and sustainability. It then derives a hermeneutic rule from Genesis chapter 1, and this is taken as paradigmatic for all the fruitful verses. It identifies the purpose, nature, and context of human fecundity, and the implications of this creation paradigm for concepts of abundance, limits to growth, and what it means to "fill" the earth. As in the previous chapters, 4 and 5, there follows a section which evaluates the major natalist themes, which builds on the biblical interpretations developed in the earlier part of this chapter, supported by further *ressourcement* from patristic and classic Christian thought, to develop a critique of natalism.

### Ecological hermeneutics

Consciously ecological approaches to biblical interpretation, hereafter referred to as ecobible,<sup>151</sup> are a recent innovation. Brief comments on local environmental problems and animal welfare appear in exegetes of the 19th century and earlier. A perception of broader environmental problems features in a 1957 commentary on Genesis by David Stalker, in which he notes soil erosion and whale depletion as symptoms of "exploitation" and suggests "a profitable discussion could be held about

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151. The term ecobible appeared in 1993 in the title of an article by Walter Wink (465).



the guidance which Genesis has to offer on this problem. Not only P, but J also, has something to say” (28). Joseph Sittler after 1955 pioneered an ecotheology which included exegetical remarks on NT letters, and later on Psalm 104 (Bouma-Prediger and Bakken 20, 32, 38, 51). The trickle of ecobiblical work increased after the 1967 article by Lynn White which blamed western Christian reception of Genesis for the ecological crisis (1205) and provoked substantial responses by OT scholars, including James Barr in 1973, and Bernhard Anderson in 1983. The volume of ecobiblical research has continued to grow: it was surveyed by Gene McAfee and Gene Tucker in the 1990s, and by Ernst Conradie in 2006. Diverse approaches to ecobiblical interpretation have developed. I will describe these under three headings and identify which one offers the most appropriate methodological resources for the particular requirements of this project.

One type of ecobiblical work can be characterised as recovery or “apologetics” (Horrell, *Bible* 11) which aims to show that Scripture is full of ecological wisdom, or at least does not promote an exploitative attitude. A radical objection to this approach is that it is anachronistic to expect ecological awareness among the ancient biblical writers. For example, James Nash claims the Bible is “ecologically unconscious” especially with regard to biodiversity (214). Ecobiblical apologetics is also criticized for unacknowledged selectivity from the canon, ignoring the diversity of biblical voices (Conradie 296). Celia Deane-Drummond agrees that these criticisms are deserved responses to unsophisticated portrayals of ecological concern as the original meaning of a wide range of biblical texts,<sup>152</sup> but rightly observes that most work by OT scholars has always avoided these defects (272). The recovery approach is often helpful: for example the message of caring for the land is clearly rooted in the OT agrarian context (Wright; Habel, *Land*; Davis, “Learning”; Marlow). However with regard to the issue of high fecundity, I found in chapter 4 that OT writers had little

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152. In defence of practitioners of unsophisticated ecobible; first, that approach is similar to much other devotional use of the Bible, and second, popular literature disseminating such interpretations not only encouraged some who were already convinced environmentalists, but also did persuade some conservative Christians to engage ecological issues and change their lives (Maier; and my experiences working for Evangelical environmental groups).

experience of overpopulation, and normally desired fecundity, so the recovery approach is not likely to be sufficient for my purposes.

An approach influenced by the hermeneutic of suspicion and ecofeminist ideological criticism emerged in the late 1990s. It is best represented by the *Earth Bible* project, which is based on six “ecojustice principles” that are summarized by Norman Habel as the intrinsic worth of all creatures, purpose, interconnectedness, mutual custodianship, earth’s voice, and resistance to injustice (“Challenge” 125). This approach has many virtues: it helpfully engages with science and politics, and is designed to facilitate dialogue with people of any faith or none. In this project where the aim is evaluation of Christian reception it is less suitable. It rejects dominion, hierarchy, and dualism (Habel, “Challenge” 128), whereas a nuanced affirmation of those concepts is necessary here. Though ontological anthropocentrism should be rejected (Bauckham, *Ecology* 69), what David Clough calls “instrumental anthropocentrism” is needed (Horrell, *Bible* 131). According to the free-market approach to biology, humankind like any other species should reproduce as much as it can, reckless of limits to growth, sacrificing individual welfare for aggregate prosperity, and without concern for impact on other species (Sideris 56). Justifying an intelligent limitation of human fecundity for the sake of biodiversity depends on construing a special human status, and responsibility for the Earth and species of living creatures. Even dualism must be redeemed, as human transcendence of instinct is required. Similarly “the eclipse of heaven ... makes reality too small, and cheats the earth out of its greatest ally” (Williams 57). Therefore for this particular project the *Earth Bible* approach is not sufficient as a methodological model.

A third way was developed by Ernst Conradie, and the Exeter University project on “Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics.” David Horrell argues that even the most ecofriendly verses are “ambivalent and ambiguous,” and he points to contrary interpretations by Beisner and other foes of environmentalism (*Bible* 117, 14). He is also concerned that much work of the *Earth Bible* type is not persuasive to conservative Christians. His response begins by noting that interpretation normally uses doctrinal lenses, for example Augustine’s rule that all exegesis should foster love of God and neighbour, and Luther’s key principle of justification by faith (*Bible* 123). He suggests a procedure for constructing new rules or lenses by “consciously

bringing certain texts and themes into central focus, [and] marginalizing or resisting others” (*Bible* 128). Drawing on numerous OT and NT verses, he proposes seven interpretive principles: the goodness of creation, its interconnectedness, the inclusion of all creatures in covenant, praise, and reconciliation, and a unique human role (*Bible* 129-36). We should be aware that our selection is prompted by contemporary environmental issues, and not “pretend that the doctrinal lenses emerge solely from the texts, nor even the tradition, alone” (Horrell, Hunt and Southgate 236). This “acknowledged circularity” is unavoidable. I adopt that approach in this chapter, drawing on classic Christian interpretation.

My use of tradition needs clarification. There is no consensus in Christian tradition about reproduction or the fruitful verses, as my chapter on Luther illustrates. I prioritize the early Church Fathers because of their importance in tradition, and their proximity to the formation of creeds and canon. Chapter 5 looked in depth at one Father’s thought in historical context. This chapter draws on a wide range of patristic writings, without revisiting their context. However none of the ideas presented here are peculiar to one Father, and most of them represent a majority patristic view. This *ressourcement* applies these ideas beyond their original context but that will be a characteristic of any effort to “rediscover and renew the Christian tradition” (Conradie 295), and tradition developed in every age precisely by its encounter with whatever issues were then contemporary.

The role of contemporary context also needs clarification. Ecobible is informed by ecological science but a commitment to an ethic of biodiversity (derived from Genesis 1, as below) takes precedence. The ecologists consulted by the *Earth Bible* team considered the ecojustice principles appropriate (Habel, “Challenge” 126) 2000b) but other observers of nature might find different principles there, such as competition or purposeless futility (Sideris 2). Turning to fecundity, there is no ecological reason to prefer a regime of low fertility and mortality to one in which both rates are high. Rather, since evolution requires variation and selection fueled by the early deaths of pre-reproductive individuals, a regime of high fertility and high mortality could be deemed a good ecological pattern for society. Further, many ecologists judge the success of an individual life by its genetic contribution to the next generation, the number of biological descendants, which makes Jesus a failure

and Genghis Khan a paragon (Zerjal 720). Karl Barth warns that a Christian ethic should not depend on examining nature (ix).<sup>153</sup>

A danger in ecobible, as in environmentalism, is neglect of connected interests such as those of women and the poor. The camps of political exegetes rebuke each other for neglect of other dimensions of liberation: one example is Womanist (black) criticism of early feminism for ignoring racial oppression. It causes fragmentation, but also mutual awareness and efforts at convergence so that one liberative reading does not act unwittingly against another. Therefore a critique of natalism should avoid denigration of the Old Testament which plays into the hands of anti-Judaism. Another caution, for ecobible in general, comes from those ecofeminists who identify connected dualisms such as man/woman, human/animal, spirit/body, Heaven/Earth. They claim that ecobible only functions properly under the umbrella of ecofeminism. I heed this as a warning that ecobiblical treatment of fertility should not denigrate the maternal or blame women for high fecundity.

### **Sustainability and fertility**

Ecobiblical writings are often prefaced by a survey of ecological crises, and here they sometimes mention population, but thereafter such works rarely engage the issue or the fruitful verses. For example, of the imperatives in Genesis 1:28 there is far more ecobiblical writing about “subdue” and “dominion,” than about “be fruitful and multiply.” This is often due to a downplaying of the significance of population, but even those acknowledging its impact apparently think it inappropriate to apply ecological hermeneutics to the fruitful verses.

Since the 1970s wider academia has normally been reluctant to highlight population as ecologically problematic, and ecobible followed that fashion, with good reason. Since the 1950s many who emphasize overpopulation as the cause of environmental crises have been motivated by anxiety about rich nations’ power and national security. The affluent North has been responsible for most of the ecological impact, but many voices against overpopulation focused on high birth rates in the global South, and Andy Smith discerns in this prejudice against coloured women (75). Evangelicals and Catholics are also wary because of institutional links between

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153. Barth adds that only the incarnation reveals nature’s meaning.

family planning and abortion. It is unsurprising that ecobiblical readings have rarely focused on any of the fruitful verses.

A dualism contrasting consumption and population associates the poor with the issue of population (Hynes 43). Population is regarded (wrongly) as a poor nations' issue, so those who (rightly) see rich people as the main cause of ecological impacts consider it inappropriate to focus on population (Smith 77). Ernst Conradie regards the debates about relative impacts of population and consumption as reflecting "tensions between North and South" and so to highlight population is to side with injustice, because it "implies that the impoverished countries ... carry a special responsibility" for the crisis (*Christianity* 21). The dualism fails to notice exceptions, notably the USA<sup>154</sup> where births exceed deaths and each year's natural increment of the US population generates more additional emissions than population growth in Africa. More generally, the dualism is based on a focus on present growth rather than historical growth. For example, England's population in 1801 was 8 million, whereas by 1901 it was 30 million.<sup>155</sup> The US population in 1800 was 5.3 million, by 1900 it was 76 million, and today it is over 300 million. Most of that increase was due to births and only a fraction to migration. By analogy with climate justice models of "contraction and convergence" which take historical emissions into account, rich nations have large populations due to past growth, and should contract. In this light, attention to overpopulation is not intrinsically biased against the poor.

Population is a significant factor in sustainability. Patricia Hynes claims that the I=PAT equation gives a false impression that rich and poor people are equally responsible for environmental impacts.<sup>156</sup> She points to "female subordination" and "militarism" as ecologically damaging, but her suggestion to delete P from impact equations is a rhetorical step too far (40). It is true that population is not a simple multiplier of impact. The *per capita* ecological footprint (for example 8.0 gHa for a

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154. The UK also has annual natural increase (ONS), though less than the USA.

155. That is not a complete picture because when the populations of European nations were growing rapidly, between the late 18th and early 20th century, a large proportion emigrated to other continents.

156. I=PAT stands for Impact = Population x Affluence x Technological efficiency.

US resident) are derived by dividing a national footprint by the national population, on the assumption they are proportional.<sup>157</sup> For greenhouse gas emissions there has been research on population's effect. One study by Dietz and Rosa finds a 1.15 global ratio of change (elasticity). This means that a 10% rise in population would cause 11.5% more emissions. Anqing Shi finds a global average elasticity of 1.42 with regional variation (35, 39). For the USA, Michael Dalton finds that the "effect of smaller population size on emissions is somewhat more than proportional" (90).<sup>158</sup> Those figures are for emissions, and elasticity for the broader measure of ecological footprint is less well established, but it is safe to say impact is roughly proportional to population. Given that justice demands higher affluence for the poor,<sup>159</sup> a future reduction of footprint requires some mix of new technology, lower consumption in rich nations, and population shrinkage.

Another reason for the lack of ecobiblical treatment of the fertility theme is a belief that biblical reception does not affect birth rates. Ecobible began from a conviction that exegesis affects attitudes toward the environment, so ecofriendly interpretation can make a difference (Horrell 6-7). By contrast, many assume that fertility is governed by economics, and religion makes no difference. However the demographer Massimo Livi Bacci finds that "cultural factors ... seem to be more significant to fertility decline than economic factors" in developed countries (116). Specifically, as noted in chapter 1, social scientists find that religious differences in the USA between fundamentalist and moderate Protestants do affect their birth rates. My justification for turning to ecological hermeneutics for the fruitful verses is that birth rates determine population size in the USA, and that is a significant component in anthropogenic impact on the environment.

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157. Nation-level data are the basis of all ecological footprint calculations.

158. John Harte argues that elasticity may worsen as population rises due to a host of nonlinear thresholds, for example given a ceiling on annual production of natural gas, extra demand by a rising population may turn to more coal (234).

159. Or at least, following the UN Millennium Development Goals, that everyone's HDI (human development index) be raised. Reducing inequality within a nation provides more HDI per unit of affluence.

### **Ecological perspectives on fertility**

The design of life seems harsh to individuals, more generous to species, and supportive of biodiversity. At the global level, there are 1.75 million named species and the quantity of biodiversity has, until recently, slowly increased over the last 200 million years (Eldredge 12). The common pattern of life on earth is profligate fertility and equally high mortality, especially among the young. The selective cycle repeats in each generation, and there is competition between species.<sup>160</sup> One might expect frequent loss of species, but the normal rate of extinction is low: the lifespan of a species is typically 1 to 10 million years (Baillie, Hilton-Taylor and Stuart 41). Five brief episodes of mass extinction (the most recent happening 65 million years ago) each wiped out more than half of all the species of that moment, but all these episodes had external physical causes,<sup>161</sup> and none of them was caused by one or a few species multiplying so much as to crowd out many others.

The flourishing of a species or a local subpopulation is measured in ecology by quantity, health, and genetic diversity. A population's health is not a sum but the average health of individual specimens. One might add geographical spread, though a species endemic to a single island can still flourish, though it is more vulnerable. Number is important because too small a population is endangered, at risk of local extinction (Ranta, Kaitala and Lundberg 214). However, as numbers rise above that minimum the additional gain to a species' chance of survival diminishes. At high levels it conflicts with health for example with a local absence of predators reindeer will increase to the point where individuals' health deteriorates. By contrast, wolves are slow to reproduce, and even when food is abundant maintain steady numbers and good health (Rockwood 150).

The population of each species is regulated by a biodiverse system, and also by the species itself. Some species do increase rapidly to the limit of a local food supply and then fall precipitately, for example cinnabar moths often strip their food plant (ragwort) and then crash with most larvae dying (Moss, Watson and Ollason 35-37).

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160. Alongside examples of mutualism or symbiosis (Vandermeer and Goldberg 221).

161. Likely causes of the mass extinction episodes include meteor impact, volcanic eruptions, and solar disruptions, affecting life mostly through climate changes.

That is not the norm however, for example even in late summer tree foliage is rarely all eaten because leaf-eaters do not increase anywhere near the limit of their food, mostly due to mortality from predation and disease.

Populations are regulated by mortality but also by their fertility.<sup>162</sup> Fertility is controlled by variables such as mating, conception, and brood size. For example, territorial behaviour means only those individuals who secure a territory reproduce in that season. Honeybee queens adjust their egg laying rate to food supply, reducing it when flowers are poor. Crowding also reduces fertility. Many experiments have put fruitflies, mice, and other species, in confined spaces while supplying unlimited food. At some density level, in all species tested, fertility declines and various mechanisms for this are observed: fruitflies lay fewer eggs; some mice and rats begin to neglect their young or kill them (Rockwood 66).

The stability and longevity of a species is dependent on the biodiversity of the surrounding ecosystem. The flourishing of life as a whole is defined by number of species, number of individuals (and mass), overall geographical spread, health of ecosystem services, and diversity. The persistence of biodiversity is mysterious but at least partly explained by species being limited to ecological niches, and constrained by particular local food supplies rather than total global resource.

*Homo sapiens* has exceptional ability to adapt and occupy additional niches, and to modify environments to be like familiar habitats. Local studies find that rising human population density only slightly reduces biodiversity up to some level, but beyond that threshold biodiversity falls rapidly, and the numerical size of nonhuman populations also decline (Cincotta 69). A sixth episode of mass extinction began (gradually) at least ten thousand years ago, largely due to human population growth (McKee 61), but 20th century growth in consumption *per capita* hugely multiplied the effect so the extinction episode has become increasingly acute (Eldredge x). One measure of biodiversity based on vertebrates, the Living Planet Index, fell by 30% between 1970 and 2003. Data for earlier decades is patchy but suggests “large

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162. Obviously fertility self-regulation is harder to observe and measure than mortality but even so it has been detected in many species.



losses” in the mid 20th century (Loh et al. 20). The human footprint (including large US and European components) crowds out many nonhuman species.

## **Fertility in ecobiblical perspective**

I derive a hermeneutic lens from selected Scriptures here, and my focus is Genesis 1. One reason for choosing the chapter is its canonical priority. Another is that Christian tradition regards the first two chapters as showing how life on Earth was originally intended to be prior to the sin and “Fall” of humankind. It portrays an ideal world but also corresponds to reality insofar as it is wisdom literature based on ancient writers’ awareness of the created world, so many features are realistic and similar to the modern scientific picture. However it differs in being a vision of an ideal world that is more ordered and peaceful than the writers’ world (Bauckham, *Ecology* 25). Genesis 1-11 is also an aetiology, showing how the original creation became the world known by its early readers. The scope is the whole of creation and humankind in general, not only Israel.

Principles relevant to fertility are derived from the text. Genesis 1 provides a pattern for reproduction. Its purpose is the perpetuation of each species, and it is designed to work in parallel, with a great variety of species reproducing at the same time in the same world. That provides a context for human fecundity as one species within that design, but there is also a unique human role and vocation to uphold this purpose of the creator. As implications of those principles, the following additional concepts are explored: the limits to growth, the idea that abundance is only one aspect of flourishing, and the metaphor of “filling” a land. These will be illustrated from Genesis 3-11 and other texts that portray a world of broken relations in which fertility has become ambivalent.

Horrell’s seven principles for ecological hermeneutics in general can be related specifically to fecundity. The goodness of all creation, and the nonhuman calling to praise God, make biodiversity valuable (Bauckham, *Ecology* 78). The perpetuation of species is explicit in God’s covenant with all creatures. Limits are implicit in the connectedness of life in failure and flourishing, and in humankind’s membership of the Earth community. A human vocation to facilitate the diversity of species and their flourishing is one aspect of eschatological reconciliation.

### Perpetuating diverse species

Genesis shows a great variety of species being created and sustained. The major categories mentioned are grass, herbs, trees, life that swarms in water, flying winged creatures, livestock, creeping things, and beasts. Applied to each of these categories is the phrase “according to their kinds” (1:11, 12, 24, 25) implying many different forms. Elsewhere in the OT over 120 kinds of animal are named, and the writers probably knew of others that did not happen to feature in Scripture.<sup>163</sup> They were perhaps aware of stories of yet more unnamed varieties, especially hidden in the waters. A divine intention for this variety to persist is implicit in the assessments that “it was good” (1:12, 21, 25), and is explicit in the Flood story where God commands that from “every kind” of living creature a breeding population must be saved “to keep them alive” (6:19-20).<sup>164</sup>

The purpose of fruitfulness is perpetuation of distinct species. That is the meaning of the phrase “bearing fruit ... each according to its kind” (1:11).<sup>165</sup> The idea is not explicitly repeated until Genesis 5:1 when “Adam ... fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image,” but it can be assumed that each kind in chapter 1 is fruitful in its own likeness, perpetuating its species. It suggests that the original creatures brought forth by the waters and earth (1:20, 24) at God’s command, the first generation, were not immortal and their continuity depends on the reproductive capability incorporated in each species.

Abundance or quantity of creatures is one aspect of God’s design, as indicated by the words *sharatz* “swarm” or “teem” (1:20, 21), and *rbh* “increase” (1:22, 28). Geographical extension is another aspect, as indicated by vegetation which is meant to be food for animals (1:20) being distributed “on the face of all the earth” (1:29),

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163. A possible upper limit is the 500 described by Aristotle, the father of zoology.

164. A wide diversity of species is essential for ecosystem functions, but even if a form of human existence were possible accompanied only by a small subset of the currently living species of fish, birds, reptiles and mammals, while it might be designated “sustainable” it would contradict this creative word.

165. The NLT paraphrase “the seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came” (1:11) expresses the meaning clearly.

and by the word “fill” (1:22, 28). Life is intended to spread across the sea and land. However neither abundance nor spatial extension of life is sufficient. Algae carpeting a sea, or bindweed covering a continent, would satisfy both the numerical and spatial criteria, but not God’s intention for diversity.

All species are supposed to multiply and fill simultaneously. I initially consider only aquatic species as the formula differs for others. On the 5th day “God blessed them and said be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the seas” (1:22). The framing as blessing and the context of chapter 1, especially its good order, suggests this simultaneous multiplying by all these species is not designed to cause rapid mass extinction. When one species multiplies and fills the seas it does not prevent other species doing the same. Flying creatures are similarly addressed. God creates “every winged bird according to its kind ... God blessed them and said ... let the birds increase on the earth” (1:21-22). Again, different species increase in parallel. It is reasonable to suppose that a similar design applies to the nonhuman animal species created on the 6th day.

A counter-argument is that Earth is divided into three domains: sky, sea, and land. The land is reserved for humans. Beisner finds a “difference between what God told Adam and what He told the fish and birds: He told Adam to be fruitful, multiply, and fill up the earth, i.e. the land or ground, not the sea or the sky” (“Imago” 191).<sup>166</sup> This idea suggested by the phrase “birds of the air” fails to account for the blessing “let flying creatures multiply in the land” (1:22) which uses the same word *rtz* as 1:28. The OT writer does not imagine flyers<sup>167</sup> living off thin air, rather He intends

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166. Even if Beisner’s argument were accurate, overfishing that damages species’ health in the domain of the sea would still contradict Genesis 1:22 as he construes it.

167. Most water-dwelling animals are not “fish” and not all flying species are “birds”. Most commentators use those terms, but the Hebrew is more generic, referring to “every living creature that moves” in the waters, and “every winged flying creature” (1:21). Finding short English terms for the categories of Genesis 1 is difficult. The attributes of moving and flying feature in the text, so we might use the words swimmer and flyer. However no distinctive locomotion spans all the 6th day’s species. Some translations (following the KJV) have “creeping” things but the word *ramas* just means “moving”. A designation based on the spatial zones of sea, sky, and land works for sea-creatures and land-animals, but sky-animals is inadequate because these are linked also to the land (1:22).

them to multiply in the same zone as humankind. The attempt to remove flyers from the land fails exegetically and has few supporters, but a similar idea excluding land animals from living space is popular. Some interpret the omission of any blessing for land-animals (the nonhuman creatures of the 6th day) as indicating that the parallel flourishing of many species, while appropriate in the sea and air, is not appropriate on land. Nahum Sarna comments on the “absence” of blessing that “whereas the natural habitat of fish and fowl allow for their proliferation without encroaching adversely on man’s environment,” on land wild animals are “a menace” (11). This seems plausible as there was conflict between large carnivores and livestock keepers in the OT world (Ezekiel 34:8), as there is today. However it does not fit the setting of Genesis 1 where all kinds of animals eat plants (1:30).

Even if a conflicted context were imagined, one of the categories supposedly unblessed in 1:24 is precisely the “cattle” which OT writers do want to be prolific. Gordon Wenham notes the unblessing idea but judges more likely that “the blessing on man (v.28) covered all the works of the 6th day, including the land animals” (*Genesis* 26). John Calvin comments on the lack of a second blessing here: “Why does God here not also add his benediction? I answer: What Moses previously expressed on a similar occasion is here also to be understood, although he does not repeat it word for word” (24). The omission of a repetition is comparable with other variations in chapter 1, which is not exhaustively repetitive. Seven elements of a daily formula appear on the 1st day, and subsequent deviations from strict repetition including the omission of “it was good” on the 2nd day, and “it was so” on the 4th, may be regarded as “elegant stylistic variation” (Wenham, *Genesis* 17, 19, 23).<sup>168</sup> In any case, later God calls every kind of creature disembarking from the Ark to “be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (Genesis 8:17), and most of the kinds addressed are wild. It includes “unclean” animals, reptiles and insects for which humans had no use, and the space in which God instructs these species are to multiply is explicitly “the earth.” Bauckham notes the allocation of food to all species (Genesis 1:30) and argues that humans are not meant to fill the earth “to an extent that competes with the livelihood of other living creatures” (*Ecology* 17).

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168. The Septuagint translators fussily inserted the latter “missing” clause.

### **Limits to growth**

Fertility after the time of life's origin continues, but has two modes; the first is appropriate to spaces empty of life, the second to full spaces. The descent of each species after the Flood from one pair (or seven for "clean" animals) spreading from one location is clear (Genesis 7:9; 8:19). Genesis chapters 1 and 2 do not specify original numbers,<sup>169</sup> but there is a progression from an originally empty sea and land towards these spaces being filled. In those moments of colonization all species are imagined to be spreading out and increasing in numbers from one generation to the next. Before the writing of Genesis that first mode had ended, since the Psalmist observes that "the earth is full of your creatures" and the sea "teems with creatures innumerable" (Psalms 104:24). The second mode is the continuing fertility that maintains diverse species on a filled Earth. At large spatial scales (for example, the Middle East) my simple chronological sequence is fair. Humankind had filled the known world. At a smaller scale an area like the plain of Jordan might subsequently become uninhabited (Deuteronomy 29:23; Genesis 13:10). The most important local exception to a full earth was Canaan, which had become notionally empty because the Canaanites had forfeited their right to live there. Colonization by the sons of Jacob, and the gradual birth of the Israelite nation depicted in the Old Testament, warranted a rhetorical return to the first mode of reproduction.

### **Land allocation and boundaries**

Land allocation is a proxy of limits on population. That more people need more land is implicit in OT texts: "Distribute the land ... To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance" (Numbers 33:54; also 35:8). The same principle underpins the complaint by Ephraim and Manasseh that their allotments are unfair compared with those given to smaller tribes (Joshua 17:14).<sup>170</sup> The geographical boundaries between Israelite tribes are detailed in Joshua 12:6 to 22:9, and their purpose is to prevent disputes. The areas are large and mostly unconquered, so the boundaries are at first experienced as targets not

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169. Christian tradition assumes a pair of each kind in Genesis 2.

170. The historical reality of the land allotment is disputed, but in any case the ideal suggests awareness of the issues discussed.

limits. Near the end of Joshua's life God says "there are still very large areas of land to be taken over" (13:1). However for intra-Israelite relations they are limits, for if one tribe increased faster than another the boundaries would serve as constraints. Smaller scale boundaries for clan and family lands exist: the land allocation text for each tribe repeats the phrase "clan by clan" (Joshua 13:15; 13:24; 13:29; 16:5; 15:20) and "by their families" (17:2). Scripture does not systematically describe them, but a few are mentioned incidentally, for example Timnath for Joshua (24:30), and Gibeah for Phinehas (24:33). They existed on the ground: "Do not move your neighbour's boundary stone set up by your predecessors" (Deuteronomy 19:14). At this scale the limit is more acute as it is more likely (due to statistical averaging) that one family might be unusually fecund than a whole tribe. Unilateral alteration of the allotment by a growing clan that wants more land is forbidden.

The principle of limits on encroachment is less clear for relations with other nations. God specifies the national borders and says: "This will be your land with its boundaries on every side" (Numbers 34:12). Such demarcation sets limits on Israel but a few texts suggest a different idea: "You have gained glory for yourself; you have extended all the borders of the land" (Isaiah 26:15). However the notion of a clearly defined land appears more frequently. A generous vision can be construed from the Table of Nations (Genesis 10) where foreign nations are allotted specified places in a geography of the known world, and they are seventy, an ideal number suggesting a divine arrangement. Deuteronomy 32:8 similarly looks back to a time "when the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance" and "fixed the borders of the peoples." This should not be transgressed. How then may Israel be created as a new nation when the earth is already full of nations? An OT answer is that the curse on Canaan justified their dispossession, so Israel inherits a land formerly allotted to others. It is a special case, and it is a replacement not an expansion. These texts speak against the expansionist ideology of empire.

### **Quantity not an absolute good**

Abundance is normally good in the Old Testament, but is occasionally portrayed negatively. There are concepts of excess, and of orderly and disorderly reproduction. The OT writers noticed that some species misbehave more than others. Moses prophesied that "the river will teem with frogs" (Exodus 8:3). Here is the

same verb *sharatz* as in “let the waters teem with living creatures” (Genesis 1:20) but now it has a negative connotation, and is identified as a “plague” (Exodus 1:19). One difference between the two texts is that whereas in Genesis all kinds teem (which is good) in Exodus just one species teems in the waters. Perhaps temporarily exceeding predator control, the frogs burst out from their normal habitat and invade the houses of the Egyptians. When locusts multiply that also is a plague. “They covered all the ground until it was black ... They devoured ... everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees” (Exodus 10:15). Many texts lament the damage caused by swarms of locusts (Joel 1:4; Amos 7:1; Deuteronomy 28:38, 42; 2 Chronicles 7:13; Psalms 105:35). The ultimate result is mass death of the species with disorderly reproduction. The locusts are blown into the sea (Exodus 10:19). The frogs die in heaps and the land reeks of their death (8:13).

Humans are occasionally pictured as like locusts, in their behaviour and number (Isaiah 33:4). According to Nahum’s oracle the problem with Ninevites is their rapacious greed (Nahum 2:15; 3:19). Isaiah prophesies an army will besiege Nineveh and taunts them to “strengthen your defences ... the fire will devour you ... and like grasshoppers consume you. Multiply like grasshoppers, multiply like locusts!” (3:15). The taunt is that however numerous the Ninevites are it will not help them, but only make more to be slain by God’s wrath. Nahum attacks the greed that harms neighbouring peoples. “You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away” (Nahum 3:16). The allusion is to a fruitful verse, where offspring number like the stars (e.g. Genesis 26:4) but here it has a negative connotation of excess. The problem of greed is compounded by the number of greedy people.

In another case the perceived problem is large numbers of migrants. “The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel ... They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels” (Judges 7:12-13). Here the quantity of these people is presented negatively as a multiplier of their detrimental impact on the land.

### Myth of scarcity?

Some scholars praise abundance. Regina Schwartz finds in the Old Testament and its modern reception<sup>171</sup> a “tragic principle of scarcity” because in the text most people do “not receive divine blessings ... as though there were a cosmic shortage of prosperity” (xi). Schwartz is concerned with (national) identity, expressed in the text through sibling rivalry for divine favour, but in a chapter on “land” she suggests that our perception of material scarcity or limits is an illusion. Catherine Madsen agrees that “nature, in good health, is lavish and wasteful” but she rejects Schwartz’s idea that scarcity is an illusion, because people “need to live on and use land” (147).<sup>172</sup>

Walter Brueggemann in a review confessed that “no other book in my field has instructed me as much” as Schwartz’s (“Cain” 535). She found a “myth of scarcity” dominating the Old Testament, and only briefly observed “glimpses” of “plenitude” (Schwartz xi). In his 1998 review, Brueggemann agreed with that assessment, but one year later he reversed his view and chose to present a “liturgy of abundance” as the biblical norm (“Liturgy” 342). In later work he extends his claim: “the root of reality is a limitless generosity that intends an extravagant abundance. This claim is explicated in Israel’s creation texts, sapiential traditions, and ... flies in the face of the theory of scarcity” (*Unsettling* 171). These two different perceptions suggest that abundance and scarcity both exist as motifs in the Old Testament. To evade the inconvenient aspect of this reality is misguided.

Brueggemann, unlike Schwartz, focuses on applying the paradigm to material resources. He speculates that if today we “trust abundance” this “causes the earth to produce more” and though he admits this sounds “absurd” he suggests our reactions may “signify nothing more than the totalising power of the ideology of scarcity” (*Unsettling* 171). He says Genesis 1 “denies scarcity” and the idea first appears only when “Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity” (“Liturgy” 342). Genesis however presents the dream as a true

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171. Schwartz finds a principle of scarcity in biblical scholarship, which was formatively influenced, in her view, by 19th century German nationalism (11).

172. Schwartz and Madsen both mention Israel/Palestine and that conflict seems to be part of the context of their discussions of scarcity and land.



message from God, and the famine as real. Brueggemann extends the paradigm to fecundity, writing that Genesis begins “with a liturgy of abundance... In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply” (342). He suggests that a later Pharaoh’s tyranny, 400 years after Joseph’s famine, stems from similar fears: “Exodus records the contest between the liturgy of abundance and the myth of scarcity” for when Israelites “multiply ... Pharaoh decides that they have become so numerous that he doesn’t want any more Hebrew babies” (343). Genesis however identifies Pharaoh’s motive as fear that during a war they might join his enemies (Exodus 1:10). That later Pharaoh’s worry was the relative size of Egyptian and Hebrew groups, not absolute numbers or food scarcity.

Brueggemann’s declared aim was to rebuke consumerism, to persuade his readers that the USA need not compete with rival nations for resources, and to encourage international justice. The motives are good but his denial of limits is unhelpful, and results in language that is almost cornucopian. His dichotomy of “abundance and scarcity” could be reformulated as “generosity and greed” and that would serve his purpose better. It is precisely because material limits do exist that neighbourliness is needed, and one aspect of this virtue is self-restraint of fecundity by individuals and nation-states.

### **Vocation informs reproduction**

Though all species are blessed with fertility, for humankind this faculty is uniquely tied to a vocation of government of other species and the land. The syntax of 1:28 warns against a “neat division” between procreation and dominion (Cohen 13), so the exercise of human fecundity should be guided by this vocation. Even if human rule were intended to be oppressive, a king needs subjects to be a king, so a fecundity that drives subject species to extinction cannot be intended. Further, the scope is “every living thing” (1:28) so a fullness of dominion requires that no species should be exterminated. Further, many argue that “rule” is not meant to be tyranny. God’s rule is sustaining and nurturing (Psalm 104:10-26; Psalm 145:9,16), therefore to rule in his image is to do likewise (Bauckham 31). Kingship is often idealized in the metaphor of a shepherd (Lohfink 12), and a Christian model of dominion looks to Jesus’ example of servant kingship .

A special responsibility carried by the chosen people can be derived from the call of Abraham. God foretells that “in you all the clans of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).<sup>173</sup> The primary reference is to other peoples, but there is room here for a wider ecological reception. The word *mishpachah* is not the usual word for family households and is often translated “clan” as for example in “clans of Levi” where it denotes all the branches which descend from the named source. Further, the word is used in Genesis 8:19, with a generic sense, to refer to nonhuman creatures. Since the first *toledot*<sup>174</sup> (Genesis 2:4) introduces the “generations” of the earth as all kinds of living things which God has commanded the land and sea to bring forth (Genesis 1:20, 24), the “clans of the earth” which are to be blessed can be taken to encompass every species.

## Responding to natalist arguments

As in the other evaluative chapters (4 and 5) the following section evaluates in turn each of the major types of natalist argument identified in chapter 2. Here it is done with reference to contemporary concerns for ecological sustainability and biodiversity, and the effect of demographic change, drawing upon the ecobiblical interpretations above, and *ressourcement* from classic Christian thought.

### Blessing

The claim that “children are a blessing, the more the better” assumes that additional quantity is a greater blessing. However the Old Testament has a concept of surfeit which, though never applied to human fertility, is suggestive for critique of natalism. Excess of one kind of blessing can be detrimental to other blessings. Sleep is a blessing (Psalms 127:2) but an excess causes poverty (Proverbs 6:10-11; 24:33).

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173. The translation is notoriously difficult and controversial. Westermann sees here a promise that Abraham’s descendants will be famously blessed, admired so others will wish “that I might be blessed like them”, or in other words “The nations will not be blessed by Abraham (and his family)—the patriarchs will not function as the agents of blessing—but the nations will bless themselves in him (them)—the patriarchs will serve as examples of blessing” (Biddle 603). However tradition (based on Acts 3:25) insists that Abraham’s (spiritual) progeny, Christ and the church, will bless others.

174. The branching ancestral sequence in Genesis is structured by ten verses with *toledot*, for example “these are the generations of Noah” (6:9).

Conversely, wealth is a blessing but “the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep” (Ecclesiastes 5:12, NIV). The goal is that in the life of each individual and each community different kinds of blessing should be in balance. The rate at which one accumulates blessings can be too fast. “A greedy person tries to get rich quick, but it only leads to poverty” (Proverbs 28:22, NLT).

Acquisition of blessings may damage long-term interests. Too many blessings may lead one to ignore YHWH who is the source of all blessing. Israel is warned to “beware that you do not forget the LORD ... when your herds and flocks multiply ... and all that you have multiplies” (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, NASB). This idea can be extended to human fertility. David Shepherd comments on Job 21:15: “Having secured their legacy through the production of offspring, the wicked go down to Sheol in defiant mood for God can offer them no more life than they have already secured for themselves in the shape of their descendants” (93-94).

The verb increase (or multiply) is qualified and limited by being a blessing. Since the central OT meaning of blessing is prosperity and flourishing (Grüneberg 110), multiplication should not go so far as to affect these negatively. Increase that continues beyond the point where it becomes detrimental to the flourishing of some human individuals is certainly not a blessing.

The meaning of blessing is transformed in Christian tradition. In the New Testament the word translated blessing refers to salvation, as in 1 Peter 3:9 where “inherit blessing” has an eschatological referent. Westermann surveys the wider semantic field of blessing and argues that a few NT verses retain the OT material reference (*Blessing* 79, 85, 90). For example blessing still applies to the maturing and health of the child Jesus (Luke 2:52). Blessing in the New Testament however is never applied to marriage or childbearing. In any case, Westermann agrees that the primary reference of blessing is now spiritual. Insofar as material prosperity persists as an aspect of blessing, it is transferred from the genetic kin group to the church as spiritual family. Now its “recipient was the community assembled for worship” (*Blessing* 47). This speaks against a universalist type of natalism. For the church it suggests that the emphasis should be placed on blessings and prosperity which are spiritual. Peter Cotterell warns that in prosperity theology “promises appropriate to

one covenant are imported inappropriately into the second” (20), and an analogous rebuke could be directed at natalist reception.<sup>175</sup>

### **Ancestral lineage**

Do individuals have a reproductive obligation to their ancestors, to their nation, or to the human species? The duty to one’s parents and forefathers to continue their lineage, which was normal in pre-modern cultures, was challenged by Christianity. The *Life of Thecla* portrays pagans opposing preachers of resurrection with a riposte that “true resurrection” is simply “the succession of children born from us, by which the image of those who begot them is renewed” for these replicas “move among the living, as if risen from the dead” (Brown, *Body* 7; ANF 8.488). Two different visions of how to achieve immortality clash here, and one site of conflict was the father’s authority to arrange marriages to safeguard his lineage. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, celebrates those young people who resist parental pressure to marry. He urges their peers to “conquer family loyalty first” (Brown, *Body* 344), and similarly Basil (one of the Cappadocian Fathers) identifies the social instinct to build one’s dynasty as a bad habit which Christians must break (291).

Tertullian, aiming primarily at childless widowers who wanted to remarry, rebukes those “who go in quest of offspring!” He is appalled “that Christians should be concerned about posterity ... Is a servant of God to hope for heirs, when he has disinherited himself from the world?” He and other Church Fathers point out that “a childless man has an everlasting name” (Isaiah 55:5). Tertullian asks disapprovingly if a man seeks offspring “to perform the last rites over his grave!” (ANF 4.57). A major purpose of raising descendants was memorial at the family burial site (Brichto 4), but Jesus tells a potential disciple to “leave the dead to bury the dead” (Matthew 8:21). The New Testament supports obligations for the welfare of living parents, but there is no duty to provide grandchildren, nor to perpetuate ancestors’ genes. Ancient and modern visions of immortality through descendants are incompatible with the belief in a personal resurrection.

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175. Cotterell’s booklet concerns prosperity theology, and does not mention natalism. A possible similarity between the two phenomena might be a topic for future research.

### Perpetuating humankind

Most patristic writers consider the preservation of the species the only valid justification for procreation. For example, John of Damascus in the 8th century discerns that “to prevent the wearing out and destruction of the race by death, marriage was devised that the race of men may be preserved through procreation of children” (*Exposition of Orthodox Faith* 4.24, tr. NPNF2 9:97). Many suggest it had since become a less pressing necessity. Cyprian contrasts the time of origins and his era: “While yet the world was uncultivated and empty ... we increased for the extension of the human race ... Now when the earth is filled and the world is peopled, they who can, receive continence” (ANF 5.436). This may imply that if human numbers dwindled toward extinction then reproduction would be more necessary. Thomas Aquinas is unusual in making this idea explicit, and concedes a collective duty to perpetuate the species, though not an obligation, for “the precept given concerning procreation pertains to the entire collective of human beings ... It therefore suffices ... if only certain people meet the needs of bodily reproduction while others abstain” (Cohen 291). Karl Barth is more cautious, arguing that “there is no necessity, no general command, to continue the human race” for now “the Kingdom of God comes and this world is passing away” (266).

There is no near prospect that *Homo sapiens* due to insufficient fertility will decline to a number (less than 1 million) that would make the species vulnerable to extinction. The human population in Cyprian’s time was under 200 million. Today it is over 6,850 million and still growing. The long-range UN projection has a peak at 9.2 billion by 2075, and falls to 8.5 billion by 2150, assuming global fertility (TFR) drops to 2 (UN). In a low variant scenario in which global TFR drops to 1.85, and when the projection is extended to the year 2300, numbers could shrink to 2.3 billion. Even if that far-fetched scenario happened, the population in 2300 would still be eleven times greater than it was when Cyprian lived.

Since the human footprint exceeds global biocapacity, population shrinkage is desirable but, arguably, if the rate of change were too rapid it could be detrimental to human welfare. In the long-range projection the fastest rate of annual decrease is 0.15% and it happens between 2100 and 2125 (UN). The low variant has a 0.46%

rate in the quarter century to 2075 and then 0.75% until 2125. For comparison, Russia has experienced 0.5% annual decrease since 1991. Whether such rates are too fast is hard to assess as it is a new phenomenon. Lower population density would raise average welfare through reducing land prices (Turner, "Population" 3016).<sup>176</sup> One effect of shrinkage would be to increase the structural ageing already caused by lengthening lifespan, which for men in the UK has risen 8 years in the last 25 years (ONS). Adair Turner, former Chair of the UK Pensions Commission, explains how this could be ameliorated by changes in tax and pension rules, and by raising the retirement age so some of the added years of lifespan are shifted into working years. It is viable because "health at any given age is increasing rapidly," for example in the 1990s an average French woman of 75 was as fit as a woman aged 62 was in 1900 (Turner, "Population" 3011). Much can be done to ameliorate the effects of structural ageing by reducing avoidable causes of infirmity, so rapid population shrinkage need not be so detrimental to welfare.

There is a chronological mismatch in the argument that hypothetical future decrease of population warrants high birth rates now. Today population is not only too high but still rising. Even in the low variant scenario, rapid decrease (greater than 0.5% annually) does not happen until after 2075. Birth rates can be changed rapidly, for example in the UK child tax credits within one year of introduction stimulated a 15% rise in fertility among recipient couples (Brewer, Ratcliffe & Smith 2007). In the USA fertility rose from 2.1 to 3.7 between 1937 and 1957. That large jump can be compared to the mere 0.15 difference in TFR between the UN low (1.85) and medium (2.0) scenarios. So there is no need to promote natalism a half-century or more in advance of a situation that might perhaps justify it. The only remaining argument is that nations whose TFR is below 1.5 are stuck in a "low fertility trap" that makes fertility keep falling due to momentum and cultural transmission of a low ideal family size (Lutz and Skirbekk 701). The trap theory was challenged after 2000 by rising fertility in such nations (Goldstein, Sabotka and Jasilioniene 644). In any case this argument was never relevant to the USA or UK. The time to debate whether

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176. Low fertility and population shrinkage also increase the average inheritance of capital, which raises average welfare.

local social natalism may be helpful would be much nearer to 2075, and even then only if the UN low variant scenario seemed to be happening.

### **National welfare**

There is no duty for Christians to perpetuate by reproduction the ethnic group or nation into which they are born. Genesis 1:28 is not addressed to each Gentile nation in particular but, ostensibly, to humankind as a whole. Further, the church has superseded national loyalty so now “there is not Greek and Jew ... barbarian and Scythian” (Colossians 3:11). A continuing plurality of nations is assumed in the NT (Revelation 21:26), but no nation is guaranteed perpetuity. Tertullian, discussing various reasons why some men foolishly seek offspring asks: “Is it, perchance, for the commonwealth ... for fear States fail, if no rising generations be trained up?” (ANF 4.57). He considers this an unworthy motive.

The question whether local circumstances can justify encouragement of higher local fertility cannot be ignored. Karl Barth suggests “there may even be times and situations in which it will be the duty of the Christian community to awaken either a people or section of a people ... that to avoid arbitrary decay they should make use of this merciful divine permission and seriously try to maintain the race. But a general necessity ... cannot be maintained on a Christian basis” (268).<sup>177</sup> This is not for the sake of nationhood *per se* but for human welfare. Some natalists claim this circumstance applies today, so high fertility is now a patriotic duty to avoid national suicide. Allan Carlson claims: “Europe is dying ... America is not far behind” (65). However the median projection (including net migration) is that the US population will grow to 439 million by 2050 (Census Bureau). The case of Europe must be considered, not least because natalist outreach addresses European Christians. The population of the EU is rising slowly and is projected to peak in 2035 (EuroStat). Therefore it seems that remedial local natalism cannot be justified at present, but one can imagine some counter-arguments.

Nativists may complain that the population projections cited above include immigration continuing at present levels. Nativism is a fantasy: in European states,

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177. This is a proviso within a long section in which Barth demolishes the idea that there is an obligation to reproduce.

and even more so in the USA, a large part of the so-called old-stock people descend from immigrants if traced back a few centuries.<sup>178</sup> However even if, for the sake of argument, one allows nativists to discount net migration, the USA has more births than deaths: for example 4.25 million births and 2.47 million deaths in 2008 (Census Bureau). Al Mohler laments a “disastrous fall in European birthrates” (“Birthrates”), but in fact Europe currently has slightly more births than deaths. That is especially so in the UK which in 2009 had 790,000 births and 491,000 deaths (ONS).<sup>179</sup> Granted, some nations, notably Russia, Italy, and Germany, do have less births than deaths, but natalists exaggerate their shrinkage. Carlson and Mero claim that by 2050 Italy’s population (currently 59 million) will fall to 41 million (65), but Italy’s statistics agency predicts it will rise to 61.7 million by that date (ISTAT). Even if migration were excluded the natural decrease would only reduce Italy’s “native” population to 53.5 million by 2050. That was the total in 1968 and it was not regarded as being too low then! Further, since Italy’s total footprint is now 290 gHa (standardized hectares) whereas its national biocapacity is only 60 gHa (GFN), any decrease in Italy’s population would be a step toward sustainability.

Some point to the more distant future. It is projected that by 2070 Europe will return to the population total it had in 2010. Since the ecological footprint of Europe is already running at over 200% of its biocapacity that scenario would be beneficial for sustainability. Nations do fear a diminution relative to other global regions, for example the European Parliament in 1984 expressed concern about “the declining share of Europe’s population in the world total, and ensuing effects on Europe’s standing and influence in the world” and resolved to promote fertility (Demeny 169). Such motives are unworthy for Christians.

### **Building the church**

Natalists claim that biological reproduction is a good way to add church members. There are two rationales for this. As noted in chapter 2, Campbell implies that offspring born to Christian parents have a status different from other babies. This

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178. US natalist writers, with recent European ancestors, should be aware of this.

179. UK population growth was and is more a result of natural increase (births) than of net migration, except in the years between 2000 and 2007 (ONS).



is based on a conflation of hereditary covenant, circumcision, and the designation of offspring as “holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14).<sup>180</sup> However, if we consider the case of a Christian household with two infants, one of whom is adopted, unless natalists want to claim higher spiritual status for the natural infant over the other they must concede that biological reproduction *per se* offers no advantage. A far stronger rationale is that the real goal is influencing children, and biological parenthood secures custody and power over education.<sup>181</sup>

There are however other ways to gain that influence. One is transfer of custody, for example Christians have opportunities for adoption. Until the 20th century foundling babies were often given to the church, and after initial rearing by wet-nurses some were brought up by religious orders and given a choice to stay at age fourteen. Although many were added to the church in this way it was a response to need rather than a tactic for church growth. It was regarded as more fruitful for Christians to spend time on the spiritual formation of older children than on rearing infants. For example, the Synod of Toledo in 656 ruled that when parents donated oblates to religious orders the minimum age was ten.<sup>182</sup> Beyond custody, a more direct way to achieve the goal of formative education is the day-school model in which parents house and feed children while the church provides spiritual formation. This became by far the more common approach and schools inducted vast numbers into the church during the history of Christian missions.

A deeper critique of natalism qualifies the role even of training and shaping. Youthful formation or its lack does not determine salvation, because of the Holy Spirit’s freedom (John 3:8), and choice in election or free will. Conversion is the only way to enter the church, regardless of ancestry. Eusebius of Caesarea devotes part of *Demonstratio Evangelica* to the question: “Why a numerous offspring is not as great a concern to us as it was” for the OT patriarchs. He asks: “why were they

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180. The text may refer to the children of a mixed faith marriage.

181. Cultures vary, geographically and historically, in how much control is granted exclusively to biological parents. Others with customary rights to shape children may include tribal elders (as in initiation customs), or close kin, or the nation-state.

182. The OT model is Hannah’s donation of her firstborn (1 Samuel 1:28).

keenly concerned with marriage and reproduction, while we to some extent disregard it?" They "wished to hand on to posterity the fiery seed of their own religion ... They knew they could be the teachers and guides of their families." The reasons for "the ancient men of God begetting children cannot apply to Christians today." Eusebius admits reproduction was normal in the old era, but now celibate "preachers of the word ... bring up not one or two children but a prodigious number" by spiritual birth. The new way of Jesus is more effective as Christians now are "multiplying daily, according to the divine commandment, 'Increase and multiply and replenish the earth' which in them is fulfilled more truly and divinely" through evangelism and teaching (*Dem. Evang.* 9.3 tr. Ferrar 157).

The actors in church-building are spiritual fathers and mothers, not biological ones. Karl Barth says God is the only true father (see Ephesians 3:15; Matthew 23:9) and humans reflect true parenthood insofar as they teach the Gospel. The mission of older (in faith) to younger is the essence of reproduction, whereas natural parenthood is just one aspect and Barth calls it "incidental" (244). NT usage of parental and kin language indicates the spiritual connection is primary and blood relation is secondary (1 Timothy 1:2,18; Titus 1:4; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Luke 11:15; Philemon 10). Jesus says the disciples are new brothers, and conversely biological family may be enemies (Mark 3:31; 13:12; Luke 14:26). Paul calls the Corinthians his children, and Barth judges this more than a mere figure of speech (244). Basil, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, similarly refers to the celibate older women who inspire young women's conversion as the "holy lineage" of faith (Brown, *Body* 278). Even within the Old Testament apparently genetic language can have a different meaning. The word *ab* (usually meaning father) can refer to a prophet (2 Kings 6:21), priest (Judges 18:19), king (1 Samuel 24:11), governor (Isaiah 22:20), or deputy (Genesis 45:8). Desmond Alexander suggests the promise of Abraham becoming a "father of many nations" and Sarah a "mother of nations" (17:4,16) can be read in the non-biological sense as their being a "channel of divine blessing" (86).

Church increase by conversion has no impact on total population size, whereas endogenous growth by sexual reproduction is ecologically unsustainable. A natalist claims that more well-reared Christian children less addicted to consumerism are better for the environment (Pride 62-3). That may be true, but is outweighed by the

rise in total numbers inherent in the endogenous approach. For example, given a national population (of any size) which is 10% Christian, and assuming no natural increase among the non-Christians, to make the nation 20% Christian using the endogenous method would increase the overall national population by 11.25%. To make the nation 50% Christian would require an 80% increase in the total national population. Also it would never become fully Christian by that method because there would also be some descendants of the non-Christian people. Church growth by conversion is the better way.<sup>183</sup>

### **Populating heaven**

Natalists look at temporal fluctuations of membership numbers, but tradition points to a cumulative number that includes not just those currently walking the earth, but all Christians who ever lived and share in resurrection, the “communion of saints.” The stars in heaven are a metaphor for saints, and suggest characteristics for their reproduction. Genesis 1 depicts spaces created on days 1-3 and then on days 4-6 the spaces are filled with creatures. Stars are created on day 4 and this is the only case where God creates each one directly and individually, rather than pairs to reproduce. Ancient observers regarded the stars as about three thousand in number, not increasing in number, but immortal.<sup>184</sup> Patristic writers favoured stars as a more suitable metaphor for Christians than dust, sand, or grass, the other OT metaphors of fecundity and far more numerous than stars. Dust and grass have a connotation of mortality, but stars are fixed in number like the elect. From a scientific viewpoint stars are very long-lived, and new stars are born from the debris of past dead stars, which is like reproduction, so stars can be a good model for a stable population with very low mortality and fertility rates.

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183. Denominations and missions should report the numerical progress of Christianity in percentage terms rather than counting heads. In contexts of population growth the latter may look good, but if population shrinks (as it will, preferably sooner, but otherwise later) the reporting of progress as percentage share of the nation will be more encouraging.

184. Modern astronomy identifies about 3,000 visible stars visible from any one location on the spherical earth in perfect viewing conditions.

## Command

The question whether “be fruitful and multiply” is a command was discussed in chapter 4, but here for the sake of argument I grant its original status as command. If it was a command then, given a belief that reproduction is beyond human control because only God can “open the womb” what is commanded can only be marriage and subsequent fulfilment of conjugal duties. Jewish and Christian tradition found in Eden a universal obligation to marry. Jerome observes “so long as that law remained, Increase and multiply ... they all married” (NPNF 6.344). Post-biblical Judaism similarly read “be fruitful” as a command to marry, and (unlike Christians) held it still applicable, ruling that “a man is not permitted to dwell without a wife” (Tosefta 8.4). Maimonides drew on earlier traditions in judging: “When does a man become obligated by this commandment? If his 20th year has passed and he still has not married, he transgresses” (Cohen 134).<sup>185</sup> A man sins if he evades this duty by remaining single. The idea is internally coherent (unlike the natalist construal of a command to reproduce) but is incompatible with Christian tradition as Jesus cannot be regarded as having sinned (by avoiding marriage).

Natalists, as noted in chapter 2, limit the command’s scope to married people so there is no obligation to marry. They claim God’s words were addressed only to an already married couple: Adam and Eve. Though those two do not appear by name in chapter 1, natalists imagine the same scenario there as in chapters 2-3, and this can be allowed in a canonical reading. However marriage does not appear until the end of Genesis 2, so their reading assumes 1:28 is chronologically between chapters 2 and 3. More problematic is their idea of a limited scope for the words of 1:28, applying to a subset of humankind: those who choose to marry. That is difficult to justify either from the text or from Christian tradition.

Surveys of patristic writings (east and west) find a consensus that the command “be fruitful” was temporary and had been abolished (Cohen 243, 37). For example, Tertullian says the new covenant “abolished the ancient command to increase and multiply” (ANF 4.40). Cyprian observes “the first decree commanded to increase and

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185. Delay might be allowed for a Torah student, but not indefinitely.

to multiply; the second enjoined continence” (ANF 5.436). Basil says “to every one who is thinking about marriage I testify that, ‘the fashion of this world passeth away’ ... If he improperly quotes the charge ‘Increase and multiply,’ I laugh at him, for not discerning the signs of the times” (NPNF2 8.214). Jerome cites 1 Corinthians 7:29 and explains that “in accordance with the difference in time and circumstance one rule applied to the former, another to us” (NPNF 6.344).

Arguably the original command was modified earlier, for whereas in Genesis 1 both male and female receive this word, the reformulation appearing at Genesis 9 is addressed only to men, specifically “to Noah and his sons”. On this basis rabbinic exegetes ruled that reproduction was thereafter only a duty for men, and only for Jewish men at that (Cohen 28, 143, 138). By drawing on this tradition an ecofeminist reading could exempt all women from reproductive obligation.

Some natalists claim that a divinely spoken verbal countermand is required, but many OT commands and laws have been deemed obsolete by Christians without a corresponding individual NT repeal. In any case the Church Fathers believed they were clearly guided about this command, for the singleness of Christ spoke loudly a new dispensation. Barth proclaims that “*post Christum natum* the propagation of the race [humankind] ... has ceased to be an unconditional command” (268) and “the burden of the postulate that we should and must bear children ... is removed from us all ... Parenthood is now only to be understood as a free and in some sense optional gift” (266). Reproduction is now not divinely commanded.

### **Created natural order**

Chapter 2 described natalist claims that created nature indicates divinely designed norms for early marriage, against prolonged abstinence, and for a healthy woman to continue bearing offspring until the natural menopause. The first problem here is their prioritizing of observed nature (and that a selective reading of nature) which has led to interpretations that conflict with Christian tradition.

Marriage is not a norm. Athenagoras in the 2nd century informs his readers that “you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in the hope of living in closer communion with God” (ANF 2.147). The new “image of God” in Christ is in its first instance single, unlike the original pair of humans, the first *adam*. Whether or not Jesus’ life is normative, singleness was “unremarkable”

among early Christians and was such an obvious choice that until Ignatius no celibate writer felt a need to cite Jesus as celibacy's model (Brown, *Body* 41). The apostle Paul commends singleness when he advises: "Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife" and "he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better" (1 Corinthians 7:27, 38). Among the reasons why singleness is a better choice is the "present crisis" or "necessity" which is not merely a reference to local disturbances in Corinth, but can also refer to the troubles Christians always face (Payette-Bucci 32). Paul says "those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this" (7:28). NT scholar Larry Yarbrough argues that "Paul's silence about children and the benefits of married life was due not simply to the imminence of the end of the age, but also to the inappropriateness of most of the common arguments in favor of being married and producing children" (108). Paul also advises that a single woman "is happier if she stays as she is" (7:40), and Payette-Bucci suggests that "personal well-being and fulfillment" can be included among the reasons that can justify singleness (32).

Continuous childbearing by married women is not a Christian norm. Tradition finds examples of prolonged avoidance of procreation, even in the Old Testament. Eusebius points to Isaac, Joseph and others as men who "had children in early life, but later on abstained and ceased from having them." Noah "though he lived many years more, is not related to have begotten more children." Moses and Aaron "are recorded as having had children before the appearance of God, but after the giving of the divine oracles as having begotten no more children" (*Dem. Evang.* 9). In the early church many married couples had children in their early years of marriage and then entered a state of marital continence. A few went further, reproducing minimally only as a concession to wider family and social expectations, and they are praised by patristic writers. For example, Melania agreed to bear one son and then, aged twenty, she and Pinianus settled into continence. Similarly, Therasia and Paulinus of Nola limited themselves to one son (Brown, *Body* 409).

Childbearing in marriage is a disputed norm. Eusebius points to Melchisedek, Joshua and "many other prophets" as exemplary men who had "no son at all, no family, no descendants" (*Dem. Evang.* 9). Cyprian points out "what ill the virtue of continence avoids ... I will multiply, says God to the woman, thy sorrows and thy

groanings; and in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children” and assures his readers that “you are free from this sentence” (*hab. virg.* 22 tr. ANF 5.436). The malediction to Eve (3:16) was not read as dictating the normal earthly condition of women. Now, by contrast most modern Protestants disapprove of married continence, and instead prefer contraception, which the Fathers condemned. Payette-Bucci bridges this gap, arguing that “we can return to 1 Corinthians 7 for guidance on the issue of voluntary childlessness” through an analogy between the single and childless conditions, between “choosing to marry” and “choosing to produce children” (33-35). Some modern Protestant theologians have disapproved of childless marriages (Poulson), but Karl Barth advises that “the primary aim of marriage is not to be an institution for the bringing up of children” (267).

The second problem is natalists’ unacknowledged selectivity from nature. They present a normative order of creation but some of its features are not universal, some are uncommon, and some are mistaken. They point to examples which support the pattern they advocate, but nature encompasses a variety of reproductive strategies, and contrary examples can be adduced. In many species few adult males reproduce, for example only 1% of male elephant seals gain a harem and become fathers. This is presumably not a model appropriate for emulation.

Natalists claim that reducing fertility is unnatural, but it is found in nature in species which have density-dependent fertility that declines when density approaches a certain level (Rockwood 42). High fertility with low mortality makes a population grow rapidly, which occurs in nature while a species is colonizing new habitat. It is temporary because population growth follows a logistic curve, slowing and halting when it reaches a certain density. Robert Attenborough notes: “natural historians have long been impressed by the persistence and relative numerical constancy of many natural populations” (190). The norm in human history until recently was both high fertility and high mortality. Natalists praising the former as “natural” should realize it is inseparable from the latter. In a limited biosphere, high fertility will eventually produce high mortality (lower life expectancy). Mortality regimes typical of pre-modern human cultures are shown below (193).

Life expectancy at birth (years)	20	25	30	35	40
Total fertility rate (children)	6.6	5.3	4.5	3.9	3.4

## Conclusion

I judged that for an ecological evaluation of natalist reception neither an OT apologetics nor a reader-response guided by ecological concerns would on their own be sufficient. That led me to adopt an ecological hermeneutic which also builds on classic Christian tradition, bringing this together with contemporary insights from demography and biology. The scarcity of previous attempts to engage the fruitful verses ecologically was explained by an understandable academic reluctance to link the environmental crisis to the issue of human population.

An interpretive key was derived from Genesis 1 which sets human fecundity in its proper context. At the creation, God's blessings of numerical increase and spatial extension are given to all species for the purposes of colonizing empty spaces and perpetuation of each species. Humankind is included in that blessing, but is also called to a unique role of government to maintain and defend the biodiversity that God creates. From that further ideas were derived concerning limits to growth, and boundaries. I challenged some OT scholars' extrapolation of the notion of abundance and a myth of scarcity. As in previous chapters, the principles developed were then used to critique each type of natalist argument.

The modern demographic context, and science, have a valuable ancillary function. Knowledge about earth systems, biodiversity, human demography, sustainability, and welfare economics, provides feedback at global and local scales. This informs us of the consequences of different levels of human fertility, and whether it is beneficial (that is, a blessing) or not. Science however does not offer moral values. For example, where population density is reducing average individual human welfare but increasing the total number of human beings, is that good or bad? An ecobiblical hermeneutic suggests an answer. If a nation's ecological footprint detrimentally affects welfare in other nations, or if by exacerbating global ecological overshoot it causes extinctions among other species, it is too high.



## Chapter 7. Conclusion

The role of biblical interpretation in US Protestant Evangelical exhortations to high fecundity was chosen as the topic of this thesis because of the potential effect on US population size. This is a problem even in terms of national self-interest because the US footprint exceeds its own national biocapacity: it is unsustainable. However the impact is currently experienced globally rather than locally due to mechanisms of trade, capital transfer, and diffusion of pollution. The USA is responsible for 13.5% of humankind's footprint (GFN), and 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The persistence of a natural increase (more births than deaths) each year in the USA is detrimental to global biodiversity, and also to human welfare.

The scope of this project excluded Catholic and Orthodox natalism because only in Protestant sources was there substantial use of the Old Testament in forming arguments. Their biblical reception was analyzed and evaluated. Chapter 2 looked at the cultural context of Evangelical natalism. It then categorized the biblical reception and the arguments. All the sources cite Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127:3-5, but many select from a larger set of over a hundred verses. Chapter 3 approached the question of whether natalism is a legitimate child of Protestantism by considering Luther's reception of the verses and his thinking about fecundity.

The evaluation consisted of three chapters. Protestant natalism was evaluated from three perspectives. Chapter 4 explored the ancient Near Eastern background of the fruitful verses, and the role of fecundity in OT thought. Chapter 5 practised a *ressourcement* from Augustine's exegesis of human fruitfulness in Scripture and his thinking about reproduction. Chapter 6 deployed an ecological hermeneutic with an interpretive lens shaped by the early chapters of Genesis and the contemporary issues of biodiversity and economic sustainability.

This thesis makes new contributions to scholarship in a number of ways. Few previous treatments of popular biblical reception combine analysis and evaluation. Chapter 1 argued that these components are complementary, and brought together methodological approaches from reception criticism, and Christian evaluation of diverse interpretations. This may offer a methodological model for future research projects on other themes from popular biblical reception.

Most of the primary sources analyzed in chapter 2 have not previously been researched, and the set of sources has not been treated collectively before. Previous critics regarded procreationism as the central issue of interest, and emphasized the difference between rejection of family planning (which was portrayed as problematic legalism), and planning a large family (portrayed as one reasonable application of a Christian model of parenthood). They rarely critiqued the ideology of natalism. From my perspective the issue of planning is peripheral in theory and in practice since all natalists use the same arguments for high fecundity, based on the same Bible verses, regardless of whether or not they are also procreationist. Natalist arguments were categorized systematically for the first time. They argue that higher birth rates are a blessing as they help parents, strengthen the nation, boost the economy, and build the church. They also claim that fecundity is a requirement because of divine command, cultural mandate, and the pattern ordained in created nature.

Luther's ideas about marriage and family have been much studied but little attention has been given to his thoughts on human fertility and the OT fruitful verses except by Yegerlehner, and by the natalist writers Provan and Carlson. Chapter 3 is original in testing natalist appropriation of Luther's words against their immediate literary context, his pastoral and theological concerns, and 16th century demography. Natalists claim that Luther taught a reproductive law of nature, but this was shown to be rhetorical hyperbole responding to crises of the 1520s including his battle with vowed celibacy, and a different idea was found elsewhere in his writings. Further, his short temporal horizon was incompatible with natalist demographic ambitions. On the other hand, Luther's presentation of parenthood as a penitential discipline offers support to the natalist idea that the trials of child-rearing form parents in Christian character, but has not been noticed by natalists.

Biblical scholars comment on all the fruitful verses, and historians of ancient Israel discuss fertility and population in that culture. The systematic evaluation in chapter 4 of each natalist argument using recent OT scholarship has not been done before. It finds that ideas about fecundity as a material blessing to parents and the nation echo ancient Near Eastern culture and are plausible as original meanings of the fruitful verses, but the OT writers regarded offspring as a reward so the verses are promises, not exhortations. Further, an OT theology drawing on the wider canon

relativizes fecundity by identifying it as only one aspect of a broader divine plan, and subordinated to holiness. Some attempts by OT scholars at direct application of the fruitful verses to contemporary Christians are challenged.

Augustine's thoughts on human reproduction have been intensively researched but with reference to theological topics such as original sin, or to different modern issues such as gender and sexuality. Researchers interested in fertility or population have, due to a confusion between anti-contraception and natalism, often regarded his legacy as part of the problem. Chapter 5 is the first *ressourcement* from Augustine's writings directed against natalist arguments, all of which are rebuked. In particular the church is built by the Word and regeneration by the Spirit, not by reproduction. Augustine also reminds us that although secular social preservation is a good, the ultimate future of humankind is assured by the general resurrection of the dead. Recent scholarly efforts to portray Augustine as pro-reproductive were challenged. His belief that spiritual blessings are more important than parenthood and that pursuit of what is good can lead to loss of what is better was retrieved.

Ecological hermeneutics have been applied to many parts of the Bible, but only briefly to the fruitful verses, for example by Lohfink, DeWitt, and Bratton. Chapter 6 builds on previous work with an extended ecological interpretation. It is novel in countering specific natalist interpretations with an ecobiblical hermeneutic, and in making US demographic exceptionalism the primary background for this contextual reading. My ecological hermeneutic suggested natalism would only be appropriate in special circumstances: to avert the extinction of the human species, or if too rapid shrinkage became detrimental to welfare. There is no prospect of that happening to total global population, or nationally in the USA or UK.

#### **Possible directions for further research**

Social-scientific research on US natalism is needed to provide data on the number affected, degree of influence, and geographical distribution.<sup>186</sup> Some questions used by Goodson in her 1996 survey of Protestant seminaries (including her three alternative interpretations of "be fruitful and multiply") should be repeated

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186. Most of my sources are from the southern USA but this may reflect a preponderance of conservative Evangelicals in the Bible Belt.

to allow comparison. A better measure of how strongly lifestyle is shaped by the Bible is needed as belief in inerrancy is a rather indirect measure. To correlate this with natalism further questions are needed to discover views about ideal family size, and how far this is governed by biblical norms and prescriptions, or only by personal preference. A similar survey in the UK would also be helpful.

Case studies of the progress of natalism in one congregation would be helpful in clarifying the relative importance of internal and external influence, from peers and teaching, from sermons, books, and other media. This could be done in one of the groups with a significant natalist presence: the PCA (a 1970s conservative splinter from the Presbyterians); the LCMS (the Missouri synod Lutherans); or the SBC.<sup>187</sup> Anthropological research could investigate questions beyond those used in national surveys, such as whether leaders and laity differ. Whereas natalist OT reception is minimal in published Catholic sources, there is evidence of Catholic natalism and further investigation would be desirable.

The association of natalism with ideas about gender could be investigated. A minority among natalists affirm views which Kathryn Joyce labels patriarchal, for example emphasizing the wife's submission to her husband. Other natalists, while distancing themselves from patriarchy, are not egalitarian with regard to gender roles. A review of Joyce's book by Nathan Finn criticizes her for using the word "complementarian" to describe the Quiverfull movement.<sup>188</sup> Finn emphasizes the difference between "oppressive patriarchy" which is "an extreme fringe" linked with "far-right aberrations" and a biblical complementarian viewpoint which he affirms (48). Finn himself seems not to be natalist, but his review suggests another fracture in natalism: between complementarians and patriarchs.

With regard to further historical *ressourcement*, the writings of John Calvin should be prioritized. Though he is far less significant in the reception history of the fruitful verses than Martin Luther, many natalists (of both limited and unlimited

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187. I think the SBC had a top-down alarm after 2003 about low recruitment, and it would be interesting to see if birth rates have changed among Southern Baptist congregations.

188. Nathan Finn is Assistant Professor of Church History, at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, North Carolina. His review does not suggest he is natalist.

types) express an affinity with historic Puritans, and can be regarded as part of the New Calvinist movement which esteems his writings. Kathryn Blanchard has explored Calvin's ideas about contraception, but research is needed on his exegesis of the fruitful verses and on what views, if any, he expressed about human fecundity. Another avenue in research from historical sources would be a comprehensive study of Christian reception of the metaphors (grass, dust, stars) that were used in the Old Testament to signify numerous offspring.

The paradox of those natalists who are also ecologically concerned deserves further attention. While some natalists are cornucopian, others are not. For example, Mary Pride blames consumerism for ecological damage. A striking example is John Jefferson Davis who teaches natalism and environmental ethics in different parts of the same book (Davis, *Ethics* 63-67, 263-273). Also, in an article surveying recent works of systematic theology he critiques "ecological blind spots" where they fail to consider God's care for the earth (Davis, "Ecological"). This reflects a wider phenomenon discussed in chapter 6: the refusal to treat population size as a factor in ecological sustainability. A closer look at other writings by natalists to identify ecofriendly interpretations of other Scriptures, and statements about environmental issues, would be helpful. The surveys suggested above could include questions on environmental attitudes for this comparative purpose.

### **Prospects, and value of the research**

The scenarios painted by Rodney Stark, Phillip Longman, Eric Kaufmann and others suggest that religious groups practising an "endogenous growth model" will increase US population. By the end of this century the USA would be dominated by those Christians, Mormons and others who have a large-but-limited approach to family size, but after another century they in turn would be dwarfed by Quiverfull adherents, *Haredi* Jews, and others practising unlimited fecundity. More importantly, the total US population would rise above one billion.<sup>189</sup> The consequent decline in

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189. The US population is projected to be 473 million in 2100, with much of that growth due to migration (UN 201, 212). UN projections use national average fertility for consistency with nations where the only reliable data are aggregate national statistics. However, the fertility differentials of small fecund subpopulations will, if persistent, yield compositional effects making US rates and totals higher than national average data predicts.

average individual economic welfare would I imagine eventually cause reduced fecundity, except among the most “ascetic” natalists, but must the ideology persist until then or can it be changed earlier? Kaufmann suggests that sectarian techniques, including private religious schools and home education, do enable retention of most offspring in membership (27). “Most” is enough for demographic effects, and the effect does not require that children be retained by the particular sect of their birth, but only that natalism be transmitted. The implication is that a larger US population is inevitable. The trend could be slowed by legal extension of children’s rights to end assumptions that children belong to the parents’ religion, and regulation of curricula in private schools. Reducing the tax credits multiplier for quantity of children (while mitigating regressive side-effects by redirecting funds to state schools) would help, though self-sacrificing natalists would be less influenced than others. However, no such policies are politically feasible in the USA.

Is there any hope that scenarios of US population growth will not occur? Extrapolation many decades into the future, from the current high fertility in some fundamentalist groups, is not a reliable predictor. However an immediate response is needed. Efforts to convert fundamentalists to mainstream Christianity are laudable but it cannot be assumed that many will respond. An approach more likely to succeed is to turn fundamentalist energy away from fecundity and toward evangelism. One contribution is non-natalist reception of the OT fruitful verses that is compatible with fundamentalist approaches to biblical interpretation. This dissertation adds to our understanding of natalist exegesis, and its critique could be recast in popular formats to engage directly with audiences vulnerable to natalist teachers. There is much potential for reduction in ecological impact, given the US *per capita* footprint of 8.0 global hectares (GFN), and the long-term legacy of each birth (Murtagh and Schlax 18). If material from this thesis helped influence just one Protestant married couple in the USA (or UK) to reject natalist teachings that alone would easily recoup all the funding costs of this research project.

## Appendix

The database catalogues biblical references in sources by ten natalist writers: Pride, Provan, Heine, Owen, Campbell, Houghton, Mohler, Akin, Carlson, and Watters. This is a representative selection, with five of the large-but-limited type and five of the unlimited type (adhering also to procreationism). Each use of a biblical text is a separate entry in the database. The main table had the following fields:

```

source_id
source_page
usage
argument
book_of_bible
chapter
verse_range
standardized_verse

```

The field “usage” records whether a scripture is quoted in full, in part, paraphrased, or only cited, or just appears in a list of scripture references. The field “argument” indicated which type of argument the author supports with the scripture. The fifty codes here mapped to the smaller set of natalist arguments described in chapter 2. Many biblical references could not be tied to a particular argument and were left unassigned. Citations of non-contiguous verses such as “11,14” were treated as a single reference. After compiling the database, I noticed counts of popularity were confused by overlapping verse ranges, for example 3-4 and 3-5 (for Psalm 127). I created the field “standardized\_verse” to enable production of the verse popularity table below. The few cases where no verse but only the chapter was referenced were also assigned to a standardized verse-range.

Many projects in popular reception of the Bible record allusions as they lack citations. In this project there was rarely a need to resort to recording allusions as natalists reference Bible texts explicitly and profusely, except Mohler who is often allusive. There was originally a field called “weight” in which I tried to quantify how much was done with a Bible citation by a natalist writer, ranging from a one sentence comment up to several pages. I found it often difficult to identify where discussion of one scripture ended and another began, so I abandoned this. If the data could reflect this weighting my impression is that the preponderance of the two key texts (Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127) would be stronger than it already is.

The tables below show how many references were made to each OT book, and how many times each verse-range was cited, across the natalist sources that were catalogued. The counts were generated from the database.

**Frequency of citation in natalist sources, by OT book.**

<i>Count</i>	<i>Book</i>
84	Genesis
12	Exodus
7	Leviticus
1	Numbers
35	Deuteronomy
1	Joshua
1	Judges
2	Ruth
3	1 Samuel
1	2 Samuel
1	1 Kings
1	2 Kings
6	1 Chronicles
1	2 Chronicles
2	Ezra
1	Nehemiah
5	Job
48	Psalms
11	Proverbs
2	Ecclesiastes
17	Isaiah
12	Jeremiah
1	Lamentations
3	Ezekiel
4	Hosea
2	Joel
4	Malachi



**Count of OT standardized verse-ranges cited.**

<i>Count</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Ch.</i>	<i>Verse</i>
1	Genesis	1	27
23	Genesis	1	28
1	Genesis	2	18
1	Genesis	2	23
1	Genesis	3	20
10	Genesis	9	1,7
1	Genesis	9	19
2	Genesis	13	16
2	Genesis	15	5
2	Genesis	16	10
1	Genesis	16	2
3	Genesis	17	1-6
1	Genesis	17	15-16
1	Genesis	17	20
1	Genesis	20	18
1	Genesis	22	16-17
1	Genesis	23	3,14
3	Genesis	24	60
1	Genesis	25	21,24
1	Genesis	26	24
2	Genesis	26	3-4
2	Genesis	28	13-14
2	Genesis	28	3
1	Genesis	29	31-34
2	Genesis	30	1-2
1	Genesis	30	22
1	Genesis	30	3
1	Genesis	30	43
2	Genesis	32	12
6	Genesis	35	11-12
2	Genesis	38	9-10
1	Genesis	47	27
1	Genesis	48	4
2	Genesis	49	22,25
1	Exodus	1	12
1	Exodus	1	20
2	Exodus	1	7
1	Exodus	1	9

1	Exodus	12	37
1	Exodus	20	12
3	Exodus	23	26
1	Exodus	23	30
1	Exodus	32	13
1	Leviticus	15	19,28
1	Leviticus	20	13
1	Leviticus	21	17-20
1	Leviticus	22	24
1	Leviticus	26	22
2	Leviticus	26	3,9
1	Numbers	23	10
1	Deuteronomy	1	10-11
1	Deuteronomy	4	27
1	Deuteronomy	4	9-10
1	Deuteronomy	5	16
2	Deuteronomy	6	3
4	Deuteronomy	7	13-14
1	Deuteronomy	7	3-4
1	Deuteronomy	8	1
1	Deuteronomy	10	22
1	Deuteronomy	13	17
1	Deuteronomy	23	1
1	Deuteronomy	25	11-12
2	Deuteronomy	25	6
1	Deuteronomy	26	5
1	Deuteronomy	28	1
2	Deuteronomy	28	18
1	Deuteronomy	28	3
7	Deuteronomy	28	4,11
2	Deuteronomy	28	62
1	Deuteronomy	30	16
1	Deuteronomy	30	19-20
1	Deuteronomy	30	9
1	Deuteronomy	33	6
1	Joshua	7	9
1	Judges	11	37
2	Ruth	4	11
1	1 Samuel	1	10,20
1	1 Samuel	1	8

1	1 Samuel	2	21
1	2 Samuel	12	23
1	1 Kings	4	25-26
1	2 Kings	19	29-31
1	1 Chronicles	4	38
2	1 Chronicles	25	5
2	1 Chronicles	26	4-5
1	1 Chronicles	27	23
1	2 Chronicles	1	9
1	Ezra	9	2
1	Ezra	10	3
1	Nehemiah	9	23
2	Job	5	25
1	Job	10	11
1	Job	12	7-8
1	Job	42	13
1	Psalms	1	3
1	Psalms	33	11
1	Psalms	37	25
1	Psalms	37	26
1	Psalms	37	28
1	Psalms	37	38
1	Psalms	48	13
1	Psalms	68	6
1	Psalms	78	6
1	Psalms	80	11
2	Psalms	92	12-14
1	Psalms	105	24
2	Psalms	107	38,41
1	Psalms	109	10-13
4	Psalms	112	2
1	Psalms	113	9
1	Psalms	115	14
18	Psalms	127	3-5
9	Psalms	128	1-6
1	Psalms	144	12
1	Proverbs	2	17
1	Proverbs	5	18
3	Proverbs	14	28
2	Proverbs	17	6

1	Proverbs	20	7
2	Proverbs	22	6
1	Proverbs	30	16
1	Ecclesiastes	3	1-2
1	Ecclesiastes	12	1
1	Isaiah	8	18
2	Isaiah	9	7
1	Isaiah	11	1
1	Isaiah	26	15
2	Isaiah	27	6
1	Isaiah	29	23
1	Isaiah	38	19
1	Isaiah	48	18-19
1	Isaiah	49	2
3	Isaiah	54	1-6
1	Isaiah	59	21
2	Isaiah	66	22
1	Jeremiah	1	5
1	Jeremiah	10	20
1	Jeremiah	17	7-8
1	Jeremiah	23	3
4	Jeremiah	29	4-6
2	Jeremiah	30	19
1	Jeremiah	32	39
1	Jeremiah	33	22
1	Lamentations	4	3
1	Ezekiel	36	10-11
1	Ezekiel	36	11
1	Ezekiel	47	12
1	Hosea	1	10
1	Hosea	4	10
2	Hosea	9	11-14,16
1	Joel	1	3
1	Joel	1	8
4	Malachi	2	15

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